**Bus to Nowhere**

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# Bus to Nowhere

by foldingfacets

Summary

Is it running from your problems if your problems consider you to be a dead imprint of consciousness that killed their son? Yes, but Danny tries not to think about how his nightmares of his parents trying to kill him came true when they found out he was Phantom.

After being on the run from his parents and the government for a couple of months, moving from town to town, Danny ends up in Gotham City and decides to risk staying in Batman's territory. He'd take the wrath of Batman over live vivisection via beloved parents or being studied and torn apart by the government. Besides, he's not a meta. Being dead is a medical condition.

# Sometimes the best gifts you can give is love, a fake ID, and way too much money, and hope your friend doesn't get killed by psychos

The last time Danny saw Tucker and Sam, Tucker was shoving his new ID that he'd made for Danny through totally legal means into Danny's torn and stitched back together school bag on top of the bare essentials that he'd managed to snag from his room before his parents locked down the house, and Sam was making Danny put on her baggiest black hoodie and handing him one of the clutches he'd seen around her room whenever they hung out at her place.

Tucker was crying, Sam was barely holding her tears at bay, and Danny was shaking like he'd just been electrocuted by the ghost portal that day instead of years ago.

"You've got the thermos, right?" Sam checked, putting her hands on Danny's shoulder's to get him to look her in the eye as he pulled the hood over his head. She stuffed her old purple and black purse that had doodles the three of them had done from years ago when she'd been using it as her go-to bag.

"Yeah," Danny croaked, "Fenton phone too. First things that went in."

"Your brand new life is safe and secure in there too," Tuck said, zipping the old backpack up, and offering it to his lifelong best friend with a watery smile.

"As long as you don't lose my purse or those ID papers, you should be fine for a while," Sam decided.

The boys pretended that they didn't notice Sam was trying to convince herself the same thing she was trying to convince them of, "Grandma always insisted I keep an emergency fund in case something were to ever happen, and, honestly, I can't think of anything classifying as more of an emergency than 'my best friend's parents' learned he was a ghost and almost succeeded in killing him and also the town is on a witch hunt for him,' so…"

“Yeah, this fucking sucks,” Danny laughed wetly, “I can’t thank you guys enough. Seriously. Tuck, I don’t know how you got these done so fast, but thank you.”

Tucker shrugged and threw an arm around Danny’s shoulders, pulling him in close, “Yeah, well, your parents are crazy. This town is crazy. Vlad is crazy. I’ve been sorta preparing for this awhile ago in case you had to go dark.”

Danny couldn’t help but laugh again at the lame joke as his breath hitched and ignored the wet stains quickly appearing on Tucker’s shirt as he squeezed back.

“Fruitloops. All of them,” He murmured.

Sam joined in and squeezed them both with a nod, “Fucking fruitloops.”

Danny could barely make out Tucker declaring how he hated fruitloops through his sobbing.

Danny let the hug linger longer than he should have, and he paid for it when his parents caught up with him and shot a chunk out of his abdomen not an hour outside of Amity mid-flight, but it was worth it to get a semi-proper goodbye with his best friends.

Danny lost his parents somewhere three hours away from Amity, Illinois, but he didn’t stop flying until he passed a state sign welcoming him to Nebraska.

He didn’t risk much more than a quick “Got away. Safe. Love you guys” on the secure server Tucker set up years ago using some shitty truck stop’s free wifi before moving on.

He transformed back into a human, put his backpack on underneath Sam's baggy pullover, and bought a bus ticket from Omaha to Wichita at the first bus depot he came across.

As night fell over the bus as it traveled down the open road, Danny waited until all the passengers were asleep before he pulled his arms into his sweater and wiggled in his seat as he moved the backpack to his front. In the glow of the bus' runway lights, he pulled out his new identity to memorize everything about himself.

He held in the manic laugh at seeing "Tom Kingdan" written on every piece of identification he had been given. His new identity was a pun. Tucker knew him so well.

"Well, Sam always said that hiding in plain sight was the best way to go," He murmured under his breath.

He slid the purse from his pocket. He'd missed it before, in the rush of it all, but now he could see that it was the purse he and tuck had taken sharpies to. Sam had pretended for years that they ruined it, and that was why she stopped using it. Danny knew it was because she didn't want the doodles to get ruined. He slid the IDs into what felt like the only empty pocket.

He curled his body over, carefully counting the cash in the purse, and then recounting it because there was no way there was ten thousand fucking dollars inside.

Danny pulled up Tucker's server using the bus' terrible internet and the Fentonphone.

**Danny:** Sam what the fuck

**Tucker:** What?

**Danny:** the purse

**Sam:** Yes, what about it?

**Danny:** There's, like, 10 000 in this purse?? Sam what the fuck

**Tucker:** Why don't you give me 10 000$, Sam?

**Sam:** So you can buy a bunch of expensive tech? No.

**Sam:** Also, we're billionaires. Just because I don't spend that much money doesn't mean I don't have way too much of it.

**Sam:** Just… try to not spend it all at once. First of all, I can't exactly get you more. I basically gave you my piggy bank from my room and transferring money would put a huge red target on your back. Second of all, that's a huge amount of money.

**Danny:** I won't, promise. I'm going to make this last as long as possible

**Danny:** Also I love the ID, You really get me on a spiritual level, Tucker

**Tucker:** I'm down to commit crimes in the eyes of the government any day. They suck, and we hate them.

**Sam:** So what's your new name?

**Tucker:** Tom Kingdan.

**Sam:** That's amazing. It's so stupid, it just might work.

Danny tried not to freak out over the ridiculous amount of money in his hands, and was failing fast. A light layer of frost was creeping up his seat at the prospect of being given something so outrageous... Except how many times had they gone to Nasty Burger or somewhere else only for Grandma Manson to hand Sam a hundred dollars on their way out the door even if Sam already had money? And Danny knew for certain that Grandma never accepted it back.

He zipped it shut quickly, and attached the little cross-body metal chain strap that Sam kept stored in the inner pocket before he slid it on under his sweater. There was no fucking way he was keeping that lose in his front pocket. Nope.

"If your family wasn't so crazy rich, I would feel bad for taking that amount… For all of the five seconds it would take for  you to punch me in my arm," He whispered, bringing a sleeve up to wipe his face, and tucked himself against the window, "But no, instead I'm gonna freak out at what it means to be homeless and also have that amount in my pocket."

**Danny:** I love you both so much. I'll be in touch.

**Tucker:** In the meantime, I'm going to up the security on the server.

**Sam:** I mean, if Technus can't hack us, then the government's not going to do much better.

**Tucker:** Fair, but I can always make improvements.

He stuffed the phone back in his back and stared out into the distance with only the snoring of strangers and the haphazardly wrapped abdominal blaster wound to keep him company.

Another couple buses brought him to Dallas. He sent Sam and Tucker a picture of him on the Goatman's Bridge. Another couple buses brought him away from Dallas after that.

He bought sunglasses from a discount store that had fake plants hanging in the windows and sea glass wind chimes to hide the occasional flash of green in his eyes while waiting for one of his buses.

He burnt his red and white shirt by dumping into a barrel fire in a back alley in Atlanta. The people gathered in tents and under tarps paid him no mind, and they certainly didn't notice Danny's hand passing through the barrel and dropping a much beloved shirt directly into the flames on the way through the alley.

Danny didn't risk transforming if he didn't have to, just in case the GIW were nearby, but he absolutely took advantage of his invisibility and intangibility by showering in gyms and swiping protein bars and drinks from the vending machines. By the time it took to realize they were short money, they would chalk it up to the machine releasing two of the items instead of one.

Harmless.

Sometimes he bought whatever destination was a good chunk of miles away from wherever he currently was, sometimes he bought whatever destination was popular at the terminal that day. Sometimes he spent a week or two in between buses to nowhere.

Anything to not stand out.

He accepted that he had no destination in mind a long time before he stopped looking at what destinations he was buying tickets to. He didn't bother listening to the driver announce whatever city they were entering, he just watched the smog roll over the probably-toxic waters of the dark bay as they rode across the massive bridge. Danny's eyes glossed over a vandalized sign as they came off the bridge and entered the looming city being pelted with rain.

"Welcome to Gotham City"

Well, it's not like he was a meta.

Danny frowned as the bus passed by grimey city blocks and businesses illuminated in toxic fluorescent lights even in the middle of the afternoon with the help of what Danny could only assume was the perpetual smog and overcast.

"Well. Shit. If it sucks here, I can just keep going, but they probably won't find me here. Probably," Danny snorted softly, "Can you imagine Batman having to take down crazy fucking ghost hunters? Yeah. No."

He got off the bus with little fanfare and his hood up, though seeing as everyone else did the same, he fit right in with the crowds trying to avoid the downpour.

Danny didn't hesitate to pick a direction and start walking. He was not about to be the victim of mugging his first night in Gotham.

Get his back snapped over Batman's knee for being mistaken as a meta?

All because of a mugging?

No thanks.

His scuffed sneakers were soaked in minutes, and the rest of him wasn't far behind as he made his way through the city. He refused to peer into alleys as he traversed the streets of Gotham, and he refused to look around wildly as if he was a tourist. He was, but at the same time, acting like one would get him in a lot of trouble.

(He tried to ignore how he wouldn't be able to truly stop himself if someone was getting hurt and he was the only one around.)

Danny crossed a street with a crowd and found himself walking just behind a group of kids a little older than Jazz, and after walking for another 10 minutes and passing the impressive stature of Gotham University. He blinked and choked down the pang of hurt.

"No university for me. Not that any would've wanted someone with grades like mine," Danny grumbled.

He turned away from the antithesis of what his life would amount to, and ignored the voice in his head that sounded an awful lot like Jazz whisper that *he just didn't try hard enough*.

He didn't need any extra input. He already knew he wasn't enough. That was why he was in this situation in the first place.

Danny found himself crossing one of Gotham's bridges into what was obviously one of the shittier neighborhoods by the time the sun was setting, and, sure, it was a bad idea, but he also didn't care too much. A homeless teen would absolutely fly under the radar in the shittier neighborhoods. It was exactly what he needed.

# Starting a beautiful Gotham vacation with dumpster naps and what are probably normal Gotham interactions

Chapter Notes

Hello! Thanks for all the love and support, I totally wasn't expecting it, and I'm honoured. While I'm aiming for posting this fic on Wednesdays, I also want to post right now haha, so happy long weekend, here's an update.

Please know that this chapter (and this story going forward) will contain some gorey descriptions that might be upsetting to you.

At a certain point, Danny realized walking on on the open streets of the shitty parts of Gotham were equally likely to get you into trouble as waltzing through alleys. That time was when he walked into a neighborhood and watched someone drive by and gun someone down outside of what was, to Danny, a random fucking house. The guy was dead before he hit the ground, and that knowledge let Danny get the hell out of there before he saw anything else go down.

There were perks to running around in Gotham alleyways, though. No one was going to notice Danny avoiding any attacks with a knife that should hit by letting the knife pass right through him if someone tried to attack him.

Or fading from view the further he went into a shadow.

Or curling up behind a dumpster, half-phased through a brick wall and invisible to take a cat-nap. Honestly, it wasn’t the least comfortable place he’d ever crashed for a nap. It was something that he’d long-since learned over the weeks of city-hopping.

Backpack to the wall, purse (Danny never thought he’d have a purse, and now he couldn’t see himself without it) tucked between him and the backpack, hoodie covering him and the bag. If it’s not to the wall, it better be under you. Basically, keep your shit safe, or shit would get stolen. But that was fine. He never took his backpack or purse off unless he was showering, and when he was, he stored his shit in the ceiling where no one could get it but him.

Danny had no problems finding an alley to duck into and pass out in. It was slightly annoying to wedge himself in a weird way so he wasn't sitting in dirty dumpster water thanks to the pelting rain, but it could be done. Danny sent the weirdest mental thank-you to Dax for all the years of stuffing him into lockers to the point that "being wedged into small spaces" became an acquired skill of his as he let himself drift off to a light doze.

He wasn't sure how long he'd snoozed behind the dumpster while playing "the floor (and everything else) is lava" before he heard soft arguing at the mouth of the alley and reluctantly got up when the one voice seemed to leave.

Not twelve hours into his stay in the streets of Gotham, and he already saw a man get murdered. Danny wasn't sure if that should be considered impressive.

And he was about to go stick his nose into something all because he couldn't hear anything from the second party, but only one person left. Like an idiot.

He let himself give a little snort as he wiggled out, stretched, and peered over the overfilled dumpster.

A lady with purple braided hair running lose down her back, a leather bomber, and a mini skirt with her face painted for the gods stood semi-casually against the corner. Her arms were crossed and her tan face rested in a scowl as she stared off at someone who'd clearly walked away.

"Hey, you okay?" Danny asked as he peeked out from the shadows of the disgusting dark green dumpster, trying desperately to make it look like he wasn't screaming at himself for being an idiot in his head.

The lady spun, squinting into the darkness of the alley, "Why the fuck are you sneaking up on me, kid. Ain't it a little late for that shit?"

“I mean, probably,” Danny shrugged, stepping out from behind the dumpster and walking over slowly, “I wasn’t trying to. I was already here. You okay?”

“Already hiding behind the dumpster like a fuckin’ gremlin?” She snorted, turning her body towards him, but staying open enough that she could flee if she had to, “Sure, kid. None of my business either way,” Skeptical eyes scanned him head to toe, but must’ve decided that either he wasn’t a threat or that she could take him out in a fight, “You’re fuckin’ soaked.”

“Eh, doesn’t really bother me,” Danny dismissed, not acknowledging that she didn't answer his question.

“You’re gonna catch death if you’re not careful,” She decided as she readjusted her lean to take some pressure off of her ankle. It was a move Danny himself had done many times, save for the fact that Danny didn’t wear 8-inch pumps.

“Maybe, maybe not, or maybe it’s already coming for me…” Danny trailed off, picturing his parents racing down the freeway in the GAV and taking potshots at him before continuing, “I can wrap your ankle if you want,” Danny offered awkwardly, realizing the second after it left his mouth that he probably sounded like a massive creep.

“Nah, John’s don’t like seeing their girls with visible injuries,” She hummed, “What’s your name, kid?”

“Tommy, er, well, Tom,” Danny scrunched his nose, “Prefer Tommy though.”

She snorted, “Jody, but I’d prefer you call me Lavender.”

Danny smirked, “Did your name come before or after your hair?”

“Brat,” She scoffed, shoving his shoulder, “Get outta here, ya runt. You’re going to scare off my prospects.”

Danny raised his hands in surrender, taking a step back, “Hey, I getcha. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. Last argument I know of ended with a guy getting mowed down tonight,” Danny threw out there, twisting the truth a little bit.

To be fair, there probably was a disagreement of some kind.

The skeptical eyebrow raise reminded him so fucking much of Sam. She probably thought Danny, well, Tommy, was trying to get cool points or something equally dumb.

He pulled an arm inside a sleeve, and reached back into his backpack before sticking his arm back through the sleeve with two granola bars in his hand.

“Here,” Danny offered, “My apology for being a nosy brat. Or a mid-shift snack. Whichever you prefer. Nice meeting you, Lavender.”

The tan girl took it slowly. Danny opened his own and took a bite as he disappeared back down the alley. He pretended he didn’t here the soft, “What the actual fuck?” from Lavender as he left through the opposite end of the alley to find a different place to wedge himself. He glanced at his phone for a moment as he crossed through another alley.

One in the morning, not too bad. It still felt weird to get the sheer amount of sleep he’d been getting lately.

And to think he was about to get, hopefully, like three or four more hours in. Nifty.

The street kids he ran into knew that he was new, and they let him know that he was unwelcome. He couldn't blame them.

It was about the time he was cornered about a week later  by a gang made up of kids in the back alley behind two rows of apartment complexes that he realized just how unwelcome he might be. It was one thing when gangs made of adults told you to fuck off form their territory, which was something he'd already been dealing with in his adventure of finding where was okay to occupy. It was another when you were getting stared down by a pre-teen-ish redhead who hated hairbrushes as much as he did.

He was pretty sure, not one hundred percent, but not far from it, that one or two of the older members were carrying.

Danny frowned, but otherwise kept his reactions to himself as what he could only guess was a thirteen year old girl dressed in jeans and a huge, dirty, dark green t-shirt and busted up coat stepped out to stare him down.

"Who the fuck are you?" She demanded, all of five foot and six inches of rage and sass, "Because you're sure as shit not from the Narrows, or the fucking Bowery, and sure as shit not the Alley. So who the fuck are you to move here."

"I'm Tommy," Danny stated, "And I'm not trying to cause trouble for you guys. I just kinda ended up here."

"Oh yeah, from where?" the shorter kid standing next to her challenged.

"I mean, that's a toughie," Danny started, "It's not like I moved here. More like 'I got dropped here' if I'm being honest, which you should be grateful for considering I know you don't go around asking personal questions like that to other people," He shot back cheekily.

"So, you're homeless?" The leader sassed, though there was less aggression than before.

“Not that it’s any of your concern, but yeah,” Danny nodded.

“I’m Ike. Call me anything else and I break your knees,” She sassed, “That’s Devin,” She said, nodding her head to the short Hispanic kid in a blue long-sleeve shirt.

“You’re the weirdo that gave my sister a granola bar last week.”

“Nice to meet you both. Your sister’s got some stellar make-up skills. My friend would be jealous of her blending.”

Devin blinked and readjusted his beanie.

“You’re fucking weird,” He said with a scowl.

Danny blinked back, keeping his expression neutral as the kids exchanged a glance.

The kids were looking at Tommy, wondering how a teenager could look so exhausted and keep moving around every day. It took them some tracking and a bit of luck before they could find him. If not for the weird way he seemed to always wear his backpack, Ike would say that Tommy was probably a hundred pounds soaking wet, but it made it hard to judge exactly how much he probably weighed. From where they were standing, the older teen looked… sick, almost.

Danny ignored the judging looks for the most part.

“What? Did you also want granola bars? I’ve got a spare box in my bag,” Danny hummed, sliding an arm in his sleeve, and making a show of wiggling his bag before phasing a box out of the side. He pulled the box out from his sweater and passed it off to his other hand before he stuck his arm back in his sleeve.

Ike huffed, “Look, just don’t get into trouble or anything. Avoid the gangs, but if you have to, Hood’s gang’s the best one to be in.”

“I’ll keep it in mind, Ike, but I think I want to avoid gang stuff, you know? Sounds a lot like selling my soul, and I gotta say that sounds like a deal I don’t have the energy for,” He gave a nod of consideration, “But thanks. Here, it’s not much, but, hey, always some to go around when you got it.”

Devin panicked at having to catch a box of thirty granola bars as Tommy continued on down the alley towards their little gang of street kids, and ruffled his hair as he passed by with a cheeky smile.

“Tell your sister I said ‘Hi’!” Danny called back, giving them a wave as he continued on his way.

“Dude, what the fuck.”

“He threw granola bars at you.”

“He’s fucking weird.”

“He’s nice.”

“Yeah, that’s fucking weird!”

“Does he not realize no one smiles in the Alley? He’s going to get himself killed.”

Danny let himself chuckle at that one as he turned the corner. *Joke’s on them*, Danny thought to himself.

Before he knows it, another week goes by, marking three-ish weeks since arriving in good ol' Gotham City. Danny avoids getting mugged in an alley by punching the guy out after giving a struggle and getting the fuck out of dodge before someone thinks he's the mugger.

He wanders Gotham City and avoids glancing up at night as he sees shadows overhead zipping across rooftops no matter what part of Gotham he's in.

The food in Chinatown is to die for, and that's not even talking about the rest of Gotham's fast-food options.

The fact that he can eat a hot dog without worrying if it's going to come alive and bark at him or bite him is something he cries over in the dark of night where no one can see it and laugh at him for it. Bat Burger makes him nostalgic for Nasty Burger. Nasty's better.

He sends Tucker a picture of a snack the gas station in Amity stopped carrying, and the rant he got in response makes his day.

**Tucker:** Where the fuck are you, and can you mail me some?

**Danny:** New Jersey, man. And no I can't

**Tucker:** Seriously, I can't even get my gummy dragons online, and you won't mail me some?!

**Sam:** With what return address would you like him to mail it?

**Sam:** And if he does that, it's a free address for our Very Real FBI PeopleTM to track down ghosts.

**Tucker:** I would hack the GIW from the Nasty Burger every day and night if it meant I could get my favourite gummy snack back.

**Tucker:** I would walk into their labs.

**Tucker:** And cannibalize their server room myself.

**Danny:** What am I?? Chopped liver?? You'll take down the GIW for a couple of these, but not for me? Rude

**Tucker:** Don't even compare yourself to chopped liver like that's an insult. Liver is delicious.

**Tucker:** Dude, I would stuff the president himself in a thermos for you.

**Sam:** "Liver is delicious."

**Sam:** Sometimes I can't believe we're friends.

**Sam:** Did I not find you those off brand gummies?

**Tucker:** Those are fakers and liars and vegan.

**Tucker:** My gummies promise an authentic meaty barbecue flavour and deliver.

**Sam:** I stand by the fact that that is fucking disgusting.

So of course Danny had to waste three bucks on a big bag of them and torment Tuck with pictures of him eating them slowly over the course of a week or so. Just because he agreed with Sam about the flavour didn't mean the emotional gratification wasn't worth it.

The kids mostly left him alone but gave him a nod whenever they passed by. He still smiles at Ike, Devin, and the other shit-kickers, but only if they're passing each other one on one in the alleyways where no one else is going to see.

He's met a couple more of the working girls. He lets Lavender paint his nails and pretends it's not because he gives Devin a snack whenever he can when he passes by.

The kids call him 'Snacks'.

He makes a point of buying things that'll last him awhile that are lightweight enough that he can carry around all the time, and he befriends the cashiers at the bulk discount stores he frequently goes to for said items. The kids don't usually outright ask him for snacks, but Danny has gone toe to toe with Youngblood too long to not pick up some subtleties of tough kids who want something but never ask.

Pirate crews and gangs were not terribly different when they were run by kids. He's pretty sure part of it has to do with the fact that he's an unaffiliated homeless teenager who has to provide shit for himself, so they don't want to ask for his resources, but Danny doesn't mind stealing from convenience stores by Robinson Park if it means one of the scrawny street kids can eat something that day (especially if he's trying to stretch his supplies).

Danny doesn't ask questions about shit like that.

Questions lead to action, and action will lead to capture and vivisection.

Also, from the sounds of things, Gotham CPS is garbage. Who's he to judge fellow minors running from the government?

# Sometimes you run the risk of getting your ass kicked for venturing into technically-public spaces, sometimes you get slapped with a name you don't really want, but, hey, that's Gotham, baby

The working girls call him Dumpster because of his habit of appearing out from behind them. Unless they know one of the kids, then it's a toss up, but Dumpster's the name that sticks the most which kinda sucks, especially when he finds out the nickname spread to the homeless populace. There's something a little demoralizing when people in relatively the same situation as you, but keep calling you something like Dumpster, but it's fine.

It's "Dumpster Tommy, the kid I told you about," or "Which Tommy are you talkin' about? Oh, Dumpster, gotcha," or "It's Dumpster-diver, what's up kid?", or whatever other thing gets said. He didn't need to know what conclusions they came to about him so long as it wasn't that he was a runaway ghost they had to report to the government, but, hey, gossip was gossip even if it was about himself.

It doubled as a free dig at him as a person, and a free insult for others.

He does get a kick out of going to buy a small pizza from a pizzeria on a corner of Johnson and Fredrich with the one-family apartment above it. Hearing Mrs. Marzzano call him Dumpster and mean it as a comment about how he needs to eat more rather than an insult makes him smile.

Another person told him that wearing sunglasses wouldn't make him look any less like he just crawled out from behind a dumpster. They were right, of course, but it wasn't like Danny had bought them to look cool. The fact that no one seemed to notice his eyes was a personal victory in every sense of the word. As far as everyone who'd seen his eyes were concerned, they were blue. Ike asked him once if his eyes were sensitive to light. The next day, a punky little blue haired kid was giving him a spare pair. A truce and a blessing for being on their turf, Danny guessed.

Some other scrappy teen older than Danny told him his name was Dumpster because he was a garbage human being, and Danny couldn't even be mad.

**Danny:** People have decided my street name is Dumpster

**Danny:** Unless they're a kid, then it's Snacks

**Tucker:** What?

**Tucker:** But I gave you a perfectly good name!

**Danny:** Yeah, and they do call me Tommy, but they also go "Hey Dumpster!"

**Sam:** What did you do to get that nickname?

**Danny:** Appear from behind dumpsters one too many times as I emerge from a dark alley.

**Tucker:** You know what? That's fair.

**Sam:** I can see that, yeah.

**Sam:** Better than Ghost Boy.

**Tucker:** Or Inviso-Bill!

**Danny:** Don't even remind me

The homeless population was less wary of him, though that wasn't to say they accepted him with open arms.

There were barely any resources for people living below the poverty line in Gotham. Resources available for people who fell right off the poverty scale barely existed. As great as the occasional shelter or soup kitchen was, a city where villain attacks constantly had those resources shutting down for decent chunks of time meant that the community grew to be defensive of those exact resources. That was in addition to them already being underfunded (no surprise to Danny, most programs like that were). From what Danny saw, they apparently favoured regular users. Danny chalked it up to either favouritism or a desire to get the ones they were familiar with into better situations so they wouldn't need to keep using the resources. He hadn't been around long enough to know which it was.

Probably both. Besides, he didn't need the resources anyways. He didn't want the drama, and he had the resources to take care of himself. He refused to take up space where others would benefit more.

Apparently, misfortune was the norm for the area, so a sixteen year old joining the ranks of the homeless community, while sad, was not a surprise. The rumours decided that Tommy was abandoned in Gotham, and Danny's not about to change the narrative. It was incredibly obvious that the fact that Danny wasn't a Gothamite was the main instigator of him getting treated as an outsider.

He never sleeps nearby other homeless people if he can help it. He's paranoid, sue him. That being said, he has an open invitation to stay in a few of the camps.

He visits. He leaves behind some food if it looks like the group he popped in on hadn't had much luck lately. He knows if he leaves behind money, he's a dead give away for something being up. The other homeless people give him space, and warn him which people he should avoid. Danny thanks them. He fits in better, but he's still the 'other' in a mish mash of Alley Trash, and responds accordingly by never overstaying in their groups. He's also the other whenever he's decided to spend a couple days downtown, mid-town, or up-town, but apparently being from out of town isn't as big of a crime in the more trafficked areas, but it's still obvious there's a target on his back.

He makes sure to never overstay his welcome.

Safety in numbers only works when there's a guarantee that you won't be the community scapegoat if something bad should happen, and Danny can't afford that happening.

It helps that the more he's alone, the less pull he feels to help.

*Useless. He's completely useless.*

When the group down Victor Street gets swallowed up by a gang, he stops passing by their little camp. He avoids the smaller alleyways after he almost gets shot and decides that being in that general area is no longer worth it, especially since he wasn't exactly tied down to being there in the first place.

He thinks it’s a little weird that aggressive gang activity like that is advancing towards Lavender’s turf when they seemed adamant on avoiding the turf of that collection of prostitutes, but it’s not his problem.

It’s not his problem.

It’s not his business.

It’s not.

He stays away for all of four days before he goes to see if the gang activity is affecting her group of girls, not that he could do much about it, but still.

Danny didn’t keep low on purpose. The overfilled dumpsters from a skipped garbage day due to whatever fear of gang violence made sure that he was dwarfed, even excluding the fact that the highest parts of the dumpster were taller than him. Still, there was the tiny part of him that hadn’t been killed off by exhaustion that adored being mischievous, and every time he gave someone a fucking heart attack by popping out form behind a dumpster was worth the risk of being shot at in the Alley, the Narrows, and the Bowery depending on where he was.

(If he was honest, there were several times someone tried to unload a clip into him, and each time after, it’s always a mad dash from the scene of the shooting, so Red Hood didn’t show up.)

Case in point…

“Hey Lavender, whatcha doin’?” Danny said with a casual grin as he walked down to the back entrance of the club she worked at. Seemed like it was her night in. The soda in her hand made it clear she was getting some air on her break, though  it was often a revolving door for who was taking a breather in the blocked off lane way.

Lavender jumped and cuffed him as soon as he was close enough.

“Fuckin’ Christ, Tommy. You’re gonna get yourself shot one of these days, fuckin’ idiot.”

“You’re going to have to dye your hair again soon, it's fading and your roots are showing,” Danny teased.

“Nu-uh, go back into the shadows, ya fuckin’ goblin, you don’t get to come out here and insult my roots after scarin’ my damn boots off,” Lavender scoffed, shoving him backwards a little. Danny let the motion carry him farther back than it naturally would.

“Not an insult!” Danny proclaimed, righting himself and adjusting his backpack, “I actually came to check on you.”

Lavender leveled him with a glare. It reminded him so much of Jazz’s “If you’re up to something, you better not be” stare.

“... And why would you come check on me?”

“Because you remind me of my friends,” Danny hummed and shoved his hands in his worn jeans, “And because Victor Street got absorbed into that new gang, or, maybe not new, I don’t know considering it’s me that’s new, but anyone who didn’t join were shot and scared off.”

“Shit, really?” Lavender’s brows wrinkled in displeasure, “Hood’s not gonna like that.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Danny shrugged, “But what I do know is they’re moving inward. It’s not long until you and the other workers will be operating in the middle of hostile territory.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Courtesy, I guess? I know we aren’t friends by Gotham standards,” Danny dismissed, “And you probably have protection which is cool, but I’ll have to move around more if things escalate. Honestly, I should get ahead of the game and get going.”

Lavender scanned Tommy over, trying to see if he was fucking with her.

Danny didn’t know what she was looking for, but that was fine. He backed up and prepared to vanish down the alley. The moment he turned away was the moment Lavender called out from under the dim light of the back door.

“Hold up. Back when we first met… You remember why you bothered me in the first place, right?”

Danny blinked as a memory of brain matter scattered across pavement flashed in his mind, “Yeah, I told you a guy was just mowed down.”

Lavender frowned, “You wouldn’t happen to remember anything about that, would you?”

Danny turned back around, scratching his head in thought, “Uh, yeah, sorta? Had to make sure I didn’t run into them in the future. Why?”

“Any chance I could pick your brain for that?”

“Sure, I guess.”

Jason was having a field day over the fact that Lavender's buddy Tommy was willing to spill about seeing the beginning of a fucking turf war and the hostile take over of a gang via the old leader getting gunned down with assault rifles. The other four witnesses were found cold with bullets in them, and yet there was a fifth witness.

One fully willing to share his account.

He really was new to town.

"What do you mean you already got info on that? Matilda asked the working girls earlier this evening."

"Yeah, but as soon as I heard from Matilda, I realized I knew someone who knew something," Lavender started with a scowl, ever sassy and defensive.

Jason raised an eyebrow behind the helmet, "Oh? Mind sharing?"

"Met him first night he was in Gotham over it," Lavender sassed, zipping up her coat, "Concerned or some shit that somethin' bad happened to me as if that twig could do jack shit. Said he saw a guy getting the firing squad treatment the second he left the house," She said, tossing her hair over her shoulder as she grabbed her shit to go home, "You're good to us, and dumpster boy and I are on good terms. Figured it was worth asking about."

Red Hood nodded, "I appreciate it. Did you get anything from it?"

Lavender pulled out a complementary notepad from a hotel and ripped the top paper off before holding it out, “Yeah. Didn’t know who the guys were, but he avoids trouble outside of his own.”

Red Hood tucked it away in his jacket.

Jason left the rooftop with the make and model of a black four door pick-up truck and a partial license plate ID.

Tommy left Lavender to work and wandered off to blend in and out of shadows.

Danny did his due diligence. Whatever happened next with the upcoming gang war was out of his hands.

*Fucking useless.*

Moving in between what he’d long learned to be Crime Alley (absolutely hilarious name, in his opinion), the Narrows, and the Bowery was good for being constantly on the move. There were a bunch of alleys and laneways that were definitely street trash territory. He sort of fit right in. Kind of.

Fine by him, honestly. It was exactly where he wanted to be.

*A bedroom with glow stars on the ceiling and a door with wonky hinges from years of abuse as a hulking man bursts inside again and again and again.*

Everything was fine. Better than fine. He was safe sleeping tucked against the grimey dumpsters, and ignoring any trash that fell out and onto him during his sleep. Waking up to gunshots was fucking nothing.

*Getting sick on the family's new toothpaste experiment. A black eye from the roast in the fridge while trying to get milk for cereal. Pouring the milk only for it to be green and being sick all month until he stopped being sick from it when he was little. Lasers shooting at him at any hour of the goddamn day he spent at home after the accident.*

It wasn't exactly his choice, and maybe he was weird for not thinking that his life was hell being a runaway homeless teen, but it was the most he had relaxed in years. The anxiety of both not giving a fuck and sleeping technically-in-the-open was less than sleeping in his own fucking room.

*Digging through his back pack for his first aid kit with geeky stickers. Peeling bloody cloth off of his open wound and panicking as more began to ooze free. Muffling his sobs in the dirty bathroom stall. Burning old bandages behind the bus terminal in Wichita so no one would get ahold of his blood.*

Danny let himself wander out of the neighborhoods and into Robinson Park for a breather. He found the coolest looking patch of plants away from the street and sat down carefully as the memories came faster along with the intense feeling of wrongness. It reminded him of Sam and Tucker, the woods of Amity, and Sam's obsession with nature.

Nice things. Safe things.

*Failed tests stuffed under the mattress of his bed to hide his constant failure. The fear that one day the ghosts would out him in front of the whole school. Throat-closing panic when his parents update the Ops Centre without telling him and having to dodge ghostly death rays in broad daylight all for trying to come home from school.*

He'd been planning on texting Sam and Tucker. His hands were shaking too much to hold his phone. He tried to mentally check all of his belongings, but he couldn't get himself to focus for long enough. Danny didn't realize he was curled up until his face was pressed to his knees, and his hands were trembling as he ran his hands along the growth around him.

*He was holding Jazz's hair back as she vomited. They told mom and dad it was a stomach bug going around the school. The Anti-Ecto Acts were published the day before, and they'd both been terrified. Danny couldn't eat to throw up his fear. Everything tasted like Blood Blossoms.*

"Breath, kid."

Anything to convince himself it wasn't just kind cruelty, cold detachment, and pain pain pain pain *pain* waiting for him if he was ever found. Anything to convince himself he wasn't about to be strapped to a table and studied under a microscope to see what made him scream and what it would take to kill him. Jazz called a lot of their parents' comments 'dehumanizing,' but he wasn't smart enough for that stuff.

"Hey, you need to take a breath already!"

*Dad showing off their newest inventions at the breakfast table, and Danny having to skip eating again in order to not get shot over toast after skipping dinner to fight ghosts… Molecule by molecule… Danny risking his safety to bring the ghosts back to the Zone whenever he hadn't been down to the lab in a while.*

"Kid! Breathe!"

*How many times had he had to dodge something after sending Johnny, or Kitty, or Ember, or Skulker, or any other of his kind safely home?*

Someone was shaking his shoulders. Danny wheezed as his brain played catch up to his surroundings.

*Did they know?*

He was clinging to whoever had their hands on his shoulders.

*Would that change anything?*

“Fuck, you’re hands are freezing. Aren’t you a little young for circulation problems?”

“So-orry…” Danny croaked out.

“You going to pass out on me?”

“I.. don’t think so,” Danny gasped, finding the air coming smoother. He shakily let go of the hands on his shoulder and rubbed his face as he blinked away the disorientation.

“Gotta say, never had someone have a panic attack and pet my plants before. That’s a new one for me.”

Danny scrunched his face up in confusion before looking up at a green lady.

For a second he was convinced he was staring at a ghost because of the green skin.

“Sorry for bothering you, really. Plants remind me of my best friends. They’re comforting,” Danny explained quietly to a crouched Poison Ivy.

“Not much of a bother. Better than the wake up call I thought I was getting,” Ivy smirked, “Thought someone was stupidly coming to fuck with my garden. I even put on my ass-kicking heels.”

Danny shook his head.

“No, I try not to fuck with plants unless I don’t have a choice,” Danny couldn’t help but think of Undergrowth and how he never wanted to introduce them to Poison Ivy, “I just… I was spiraling, and I wanted somewhere safe.”

“You got problems if you’re rushing into the growth to feel safe, kid,” Ivy frowned.

“It’s Gotham. Who doesn’t have problems here?” He countered, “And my name’s Tommy.”

“Fine, Tommy, but you’re still a kid.”

Tommy shrugged as his breathing evened out to a nice, steady, human pace. Silence fell over the two of them, and Danny brushed his hands back over the plants a little.

“Sorry to bother you so early, Dr. Ivy. I didn’t mean to…” Danny swallowed, pushing himself up onto shaky legs, “I’ll get out of your hair. Thanks for helping me when you didn’t have to.”

“Sure,” Ivy said, pushing herself up. Danny was wondering if everyone would be taller than him as she ruffled his knotted hair, “Try not to make a habit of it.”

“I’ll keep it in mind, promise. It was nice meeting you. For the record, I think it’s awesome that your ass-kicking heels are stilettos.”

Pamela smirked at the little wisp of a teen, and waved a hand to part the brush.

“Don’t ever let me catch you on the other end of them or I’ll never let you forget it.”

“I don’t plan on it. I’d never live it down if I did anyways. You're my friend’s favourite hero,” Danny commented, moving down the open path.

“Hero?” Ivy asked.

“Yeah, she’s big on corporate dismantling, conservation, and restoration. Can’t even tell you how many times I went with her to protests,” Danny explained, scratching his chin with a chuckle, “A few times we broke into different places to try and fix things because she was frustrated with no one listening. It’s even worked a couple of times.We aren’t really fans of the protections that organizations get to continue being shitty.”

Ivy looked pensive for a moment before she waved him back over with a mischievous grin.

“Come here a second, Tommy.”

**Danny:** Hey Tucker, how secure is the server after at the moment?

**Tucker:** Well, hey, I’ve got plans and notes on improving it, but she’s secure. Perfected the ping that makes it so our server is basically pinging in the Ghost Zone. It’s basically act as an untraceable fortress of fuck you.

**Tucker:** Why?

**Danny:** Hey Sam

**Danny:** Sam

**Danny:** Samantha

**Sam:** What do you want?

Danny smiled and sent two pictures from a cozy little coffee shop by the university where no one would second guess a messy looking teen having a frappe with a disturbing amount of espresso shots mixed in.  It wasn’t the first time he ordered it, and he always gets a kick out of the staff’s expressions as he places it. They hear frappe and don’t react, but get disturbed at the amount of espresso only for them to register the request as a whole, and look unsettled at

the frappe part of the order. It was truly the acceptance in their eyes after they processed it all that was the cherry on top for him. It was a Sam Manson creation, and a nice treat despite how bitter it was.

The picture had Ivy holding up Danny's phone, squishing him close, though seeing as how he was a whole head shorter than her, it wasn't exactly a challenge. She was smirking and holding up a peace sign beside Danny's face while he stood there with the incredibly messy hair, somehow paler than when he left Amity, and eyebags that could withstand carrying Tucker's technology shopping sprees holding up two peace signs of his own with a carefree smile.

The second picture was slightly different. Danny had his hands up in a circle with one of his fingers putting a line through it while Ivy held her hand overtop in an upside down peace sign to complete the anarchy sign. She was clearly in the middle of laughing along with Danny who looked to be in the middle of telling some story.

**Danny:** She says hi

**Danny:** And that she's celebrating her hero status

**Danny:** Also she said to keep up the activism

**Tucker:** You're in GOTHAM?!

**Tucker:** DANNY WHAT THE HELL?!

**Sam:** *Sam is typing…*

# Gotham's vibes are immaculate, except for when they aren't

Chapter Notes

> I just want to thank all of you for your support with this story. I know I'm not responding to all of you, and I'm really sorry for that, but I want you to know that I geek out whenever I receive and read a comment. It means the world to me, and I'm so glad you lovelies are enjoying it. Here, have it a couple hours early. I know I'm shooting for Wednesdays, but I'm probably not going to be up at midnight to post.
>
> Edit: Hi lovelies! Last night after posting, I tested positive for covid. I'm a couple chapters ahead, so it shouldn't be a problem as long as I don't actually die

Danny finished up his post-panic attack treat he'd gotten for himself after his impromptu meet and greet with Poison Ivy and ventured back out into the streets of Gotham, leaving Sam to fangirl and freak out with Tucker. Was it a bit of a dick move? Maybe, but it was absolutely hilarious, and Danny regretted nothing as he crossed an intersection with a self-satisfied smile and a couple dozen other people on their morning commute, though Danny himself had nowhere in mind.

There were places Danny learned that he preferred not to go. Maybe it was ironic considering he'd decided to occupy the streets of the bad parts of town a lot of the time.

Not that he avoided staying around the rest of Gotham, but, well, he had a soft spot for the baby gang he found. Sue him.

The first night in Gotham, he'd passed through the Bowery before even getting to what he'd come to know as Crime Alley and watched some dude get shot, and he found himself taking a two block detour to avoid a building that failed the fucking vibe check. It was the first major "oh hell no" Danny had come across. There was an apartment complex in the Narrows he refused to go in, and it wasn't because of the building itself, per say. The uneasiness came from below. He had no idea how to react to the vibe of the Gotham Cemetery. He was a lot more careful about keeping his guard up after that.

Danny had a list of locations he kept in his phone, and the longer he was in Gotham, the more it grew. He did everything he could to avoid most of the places that made it to the list. He did,

every so often and with great reluctance, check on the locations on that list to check for any ectoplasmic build up to suck it up into his thermos if there was too much of it. Otherwise, he left it be. He couldn't risk manipulating it too far.

Just in case… *just in case…*

Honestly, it was weird existing in a city that felt both welcoming and dangerous, but that was Gotham. It reminded him of the Zone a little bit. There were some places you just didn't go if you could avoid it. Too risky. Too Dangerous.

Some places you just didn't go because they were too annoying to deal with. Like Klemper's Realm. Klemper was fine, but, wow, was he ever annoying to deal with.

The subways were pretty chill though, and it was cool to explore them. Or, at least, he hadn't had issues with them. Danny had a blast exploring the old subway lines over the month he'd been in town. A good chunk of them were gang territory though, so he definitely did not want to be wandering around in hostile territory. He'd avoid those stretches of tunnel.

It was quiet when he entered the abandoned subway tunnel. He descended down stairs covered in graffiti and grime with only the bouncing echo of his shitty duct taped sneakers to great him as he entered the depths of the Gotham subways. He didn't go down when he could hear a ruckus. Didn't need to deal with that. Nope. No thank you.

He was alone on an out-of-commission platform, though considering he stayed away from the operational ones, that wasn't a surprise.

"Riding the subways is cool and all," Danny chuckled quietly as he kicked a rock out of his way, "But having things chucked at you by assholes or screamed at to go kill yourself at eight in the morning for being homeless is a bit annoying."

He hopped off the edge of the old platform covered with leftovers from fires, both barrel and open pit, and palettes filled with all sorts of shit (lots he had no interest in sticking his nose in), and walked into the darkness as he followed the familiar tracks.

He didn’t bother with a flashlight, nor did he bother using ecto-energy for light. First of all, that wasn’t worth the risk in the more open parts of the tunnels. Second of all, he was just walking and passing by other platforms.

Danny felt no need to keep track of the stops, and as much as he wanted to float along, he couldn’t be sure that the abandoned tunnels were not monitored. He did not waste all that effort into getting the kids to like him just for an hour of fanciful flight through the tunnels to ruin it all. It was nice to just… breathe.

Danny was pretty sure it was the tiredness. It had to be.

There was no other way he could make sense of the impulse.

In the months he’d spent homeless, he’d stayed pretty clean thanks to sneaking into gym showers as he jumped from city to city. Even though he curled up to dumpsters at night, he didn’t reek of nastiness.

This would change that.

Probably.

Definitely.

Maybe.

Danny stood by one of the long abandoned platforms in the middle of the tracks, and stared down into a sewage grate.

If he was any more tired, he would have had even less hesitation.

He let himself sink through the ground as he followed the pipe down into the grimiest part of Gotham.

It was only the many ass-kickings he received in Amity that kept him from plummeting into the raw sewage below the drain opening. The tips of his shoes brushed the top of the water with a little splash as he flew a couple of feet to the algae-covered ledge.

The bludgeoning smell of shit, piss, and other god-forsaken shit beat in his nose like he took a sucker punch from Skulker, but that wasn't enough to dull the excitement at something new. Danny couldn't help but be giddy as he began to go in the direction that would take him further into the sewer system of Gotham, and when the ledge ran out, Danny let himself fade from view and take to the air to float further down the tunnels.

Every so often, Danny found himself peeking his head through sections of walls to see if there were adjacent pipes or tunnels running on by.

If he did loop de loops around pipes and walkways, it was between him and Clockwork.

Danny didn't emerge from the sewers for three days.

When he did, the city was on fucking fire.

Danny happily climbed out of a sewer grate under the cover of night, and heaved the damn disk back into place with a grunt. He wiped his hands on his jeans and stood up with a stretch. He took his first breath of fresh air in days, and began to cough as smoke filled his lungs. He covered his mouth with his sleeve as he looked around to see Crime Alley in various stages of burning. It wasn't the entire central Alley neighborhood, but it would be if emergency services couldn't access the neighborhood soon.

Faint gunshots echoed around, some louder than others, but it was more than enough for Danny to know Gotham's Bravest weren't going to be able to get here while Gotham's Finest were dealing with a hostile takeover.

Danny wanted to get the fuck out of there before anyone spotted him, but that was the same reason he couldn't leave. He had no idea how long the violence had been happening for.

If someone needed help, he couldn't just *leave.*

Danny took off at a sprint as he strained his ears trying to listen for anyone that might've been trapped.

Cars were abandoned wherever they had been in the streets with some doors having been left open. The creepiest part was seeing doors left open. That never fucking happens within the Alley. It seemed that most people got the hell out of the Alley when they had the chance. The neighborhood was a ghost town, and Danny would know. He was the expert in that department.

"Is anyone trapped?!" Danny yelled as he sprinted through the open streets.

He was weaving in and out of the alleyways, plastering himself to the corners to listen for conflict before every turn he made. Shouts and sounds of squealing tires told him which alleys he had to run back the way he came and try a different route.

He was well aware that if he had to use his powers, it would be game over.

He was well aware that if it came down to it, if there was no alternative and someone would die, he would.

“Hey! Anyone out there?!”

“Snacks?!”

Danny froze in the middle of the road as he scanned the area as a voice of a kid screamed for him, “It’s me! Where are you!”

“Up here!”

Danny blanched as he turned to face one of the burning apartment complexes. It wasn’t hard to spot the blue haired kid with half of her head shaved leaning half out of her window.

Dany made a b-line for the building.

“Jesse! What are you still doing here?! Didn’t the neighborhood get evacuated?” Danny freaked out.

He looked around for a way up. He would’ve peaked in to see if the stairs were accessible, but  he could see flames inside most of the first and second floor apartments. There would be no safe way to get Jesse from the fifth floor without burning her if he risked the stairwell.

Peering in for a moment longer, he could see the inferno eating its way up the walls quickly with each passing second.

“The Bats *did* evacuate people, but mom barricaded the door so no one could break in before the fires started when everything went to shit, and I can’t move all the crap in front of the door!”

Danny held in a curse as he ran his hands over the bricks of the building.

“So your mom’s in there with you?” He asked as he gripped the bricks and began to scale the front of the building.

Was he cheating a little bit? Definitely, but it was the middle of the street, and if there was a way around completely outing himself, he’d use it.

“Yeah, she passed out when it got too smokey,” Jesse called back, “Tommy *please* !”

He knew he’d out himself if he had to, and as he looked up at the kid he’d see running with Ike’s pack that he’d give protein bars and fruit gummies to, he knew he was okay with that.

“Jesse, I need you to pull your mom to the window,” said Danny as he climbed his way past the third floor, “It’s very important.”

Danny heard her take a shaky breath and move away from the window. He tried to stay focused and ignore how he could hear the third floor burning as he made his way to Jesse’s window.

“Tommy! I- I got her!”

“Okay, good. Here’s the deal: This building’s burning fast. Our choices are that we take our chances with a roof escape or I scale us back down and we risk falling,” He grunted, throwing an arm onto the sill and pulling himself in.

“What’s safer…?” Jesse asked meekly as she tugged at her hair.

“Honestly? Neither, but if we make it to the roof, it’s a better shot at not getting gunned down, but if we can’t get down…” Danny said as he pulled his sweater off and extended his backpack straps. He took it off, thrusting it at Jesse as he pulled her onto his back like a backpack, “If I scale us down, I gotta do one at a time or I run the risk of dropping all of us, but it’s the better option, so we’re going for it,” Danny said as he held his hand out for his bag.

Jesse shoved it into his hand as she listened.

Danny threw the backpack over her mom and crossed the straps over so they made an ‘X’ across his chest. He took a breath and put his sweater between her mom’s legs before bringing the sleeves up, and knotting it over the backpack straps and between their heads like a makeshift thigh harness.

“Tommy…”

He bounced in place to test it, and hoped it would be enough to keep her from falling out.

“Jesse, listen to me,” Danny said, putting his hands on her shoulders, “Wait right at the window for me, okay?”

“Okay…” Jesse whispered.

Danny didn’t wait as he angled him and her mom out of the window. He scaled as quickly as he could down. In his haste, the bricks ran free from his scraped hands, but he kept going down.

A piercing scream came from above when he finally lost his grip for good, but he was close enough to the ground to just land in a crouch, and Jesse's scream petered out into sobbing.

Danny spared no time in freeing the woman from the straps, and leaving her on the sidewalk as he re-scaled the wall for her daughter. He pulled himself back through the window and crouched.

"Up you get, Blueberry," Danny panted, helping her wiggle into the space between him and the backpack before tying the sweater between her legs and securing it up between their heads.

"No one's getting baked today," He said as he rushed out of the window.

Jesse squeezed his neck in a death grip as he scaled down. He ignored the sounds of the fire eating its way to the fourth floor and ignored the way the bricks were scraping and scalding his hands. He didn't bother scaling the last story. He just jumped to the sidewalk.

"*Thank you,*" Jesse sobbed into his back.

Danny undid his sweater and let her slide free. He tightened the straps as snug as they would go against his body before he put his sweater back on.

He Took a moment to breathe before he hefted her mom over his shoulder in a fireman's carry.

"Don't thank me yet," Danny said, grabbing Jesse's hand and ignoring the sting of his raw palm as he pulled her into a jog, "We still gotta get you and your mom the fuck outta here."

"Here I thought you were just regular ol' Tommy Dumpster," Jesse teased shakily with a smirk. Danny knew better than to point out how upset she was. Never showing weakness like

that to anyone was a necessity in Crime Alley, and Danny wasn't about to betray that trust.

"What? Like I wasn't gonna at least try and get you out?"

"No one else would."

Danny ignored the pain of that comment and cracked a joke instead.

"Well, good thing I'm a Dumpster and not 'no one' then."

"A dumpster couldn't scale a building."

"A dumpster with arms and legs could. And did," He said, sparing a second to tug a strand of her hair playfully, "To be honest, I didn't think competitive rock climbing would ever come in handy before."

He pulled Jesse against a wall as he peered into an alley for a moment. Danny let go of Jesse's hand to keep a steadier hold of her mom, but he wasn't worried. She caught her stride and followed right behind him as he jogged down the alley.

Danny peeked around the corner of the alley before jogging across the road with Jesse, "So, remind me what mom's name is?"

"Heidi," Jesse huffed as she followed him through another alley.

"Last name?" Danny asked, trying to keep her focus on him so she wouldn't notice the dead guys they were passing from their places in the grime of the alleys.

“McMillain,” Jesse ran ahead, pausing at the mouth of the alley for Danny to peek around the corners, “What about you?”

Danny smirked, “Tommy Dumpster… or Dumpster Tommy. Your pick. Or Snacks, but I’m all out at the moment.”

Danny crossed the road quickly with Jesse at his heels, full of outrage at his answer. That was fine. If she was focused on him, she might not notice the shootout happening six streets down.

“You’re kidding me. You’re not actually named ‘Dumpster’, Tommy.”

“Well, everybody should’ve thought of that before deciding that was my name. Now I’m Dumpster Tommy, and there isn’t anything you can do about that!” He grinned.

“Nu-uh, dude,” Jesse scoffed, "You got my last name, you gotta give yours up.”

“Alright, tough guy, it’s Kingdan,” Danny snickered, “Tommy Kingdan, at your service.”

“Yes!” Jesse cheered softly, “Ike owes me, like, ten bucks. I bet that I could totally get you to admit your last name before she did.”

“You realize that none of you brat’s actually asked what my full name was,” Danny grinned only to frown and wave for her to slow down behind him as the sounds of gunshots got a lot louder.

“Yeah, well, that was part of the game…” Jesse sassed, and paused as she registered the approaching gunshots, “Uh, Tommy…?”

Danny swallowed, taking a slow breath and looking down at Jesse, “If we turn back, we’re dead, and if we stay here, we’re dead. When I say so, sprint as fast as you can across and

don’t stop.”

“You sure about this?” Jesse asked shakily as Danny readjusted Heidi.

Danny peaked out into the streets at the bloody chaos a block away. He could see members of the gang from Victor Street, and he definitely recognized some of the opposing gang members from Redhood’s operation that were usually on warehouse duty. Danny guessed everyone was out full-force tonight.

“No, but we don’t have a choice.”

# perhaps the meanest thing to come out of his outed identity is the mortifying moment of knowing the heroes are screaming for him in public and probably laughing at him

Chapter Notes

I'm out of Covid isolation and I feel a lot better 💚🤍🖤 It wasn't a productive week, but you know what? That's chill.

Thank you for all the love you guys have. I absolutely adore the excitement that happens in the comments. You lovelies have me in stitches every week, all week long until the next update. I feel so lucky to have all of you. You're all so sweet. Here, have this chapter early again :)

Danny could hear the men behind them at the opening of the alley back where they'd fled from.

He could also see the firefight slowly getting closer and closer as they stood there waiting for a moment to run. A towering man in a leather jacket executed someone with blood smeared across their face. The mist that explodes from the back of the deadman's head is a perfect mimicry of his first night in Gotham

Danny ignored the spike of fear and anxiety at the sight of a similar red helmet, and hoped Jesse's Red wouldn't shoot at him like Danny's Red would.

His grip on Heidi tightened.

"... Run."

"Tommy…" Jesse hissed.

“Run!” Danny hissed back as he watched gunmen turn the corner of the alley from where they came.

Jesse took off with Danny right on her heels. He wasn’t even sure if he was breathing as their beat to shit sneakers pounded against the asphalt in their mad dash across a fucking four-lane.

A glint of a muzzle being raised towards and the turning of the gang members who were behind cover from the Hood was all the warning he had as they took their aim. Danny jerked Jesse backwards and pinned her against his left side, away from the shooters, as the sounds of guns firing filled the air.

“You motherfuckers will focus on me or pay the consequences!” Demanded a modulated voice followed by more gunshots.

Agony burned through his side as shots followed them across the road like the worst version of sport hunting.

“Fuck!” Danny screamed, ignoring it as much as he could in favour of continuing the sprint across the last two lanes with Jesse pinned to his side screaming at the top of her lungs.

He didn’t let up as he forced Jesse to keep sprinting over the sidewalk and through the trashed alleyway.

He only let up after they passed the next block. He tugged her into an alley quickly and set Heidi down as he gasped for air. Jesse wasn’t much better. She was panting for air on her hands and knees as she shook like a leaf from the fear and adrenaline. There was no doubt in Danny's mind that they little runner was tough as nails, but sometimes that didn't save you from being emotionally bothered by being shot at. Or getting shot.

“How?!” She wheezed. Her eyes were wide and a little crazed, not that Danny could blame her one bit.

“All I do… is walk and run around Gotham… all the time,” Danny whispered between heaving breaths.

He quickly checked on Heidi who didn’t seem to improve at all since her rescue. Danny didn’t say shit about it. She was breathing, and there was nothing more he could do. He picked her back up and ignored the excruciating fire in his side.

“Let’s go, we gotta keep moving…” Danny insisted, hiding a stumble only through years of taking massive blows and having to walk it off immediately to win fights. He didn’t feel it any less, though.

He was infinitely grateful that this probably wouldn’t be the thing to kill him. He took a worse shot to the stomach form his parents months ago when he was escaping in the middle of the fucking semester, forever dooming him to a life of a high school drop out and fugitive of the government.

The good part of the week was Red Hood learned that the rising gang activity was birthing a very active hostile takeover.

The bad part of the week was it only gave them a thirty hour headstart before shit started going down, and now Crime Alley was in the middle of burning to the fucking ground.

The second fires began to break out, Jason didn’t get a choice in whether or not the Bats were involved in the turf war anymore seeing as they showed up on their fucking own. This went beyond his pride as a crime lord, so he let it slide, but the furry family was on thin fucking ice.

He let them evacuate the Alley. He let them in his territory. He let them capture everyone they could as he lead a counter war against the dumbasses stupid enough to piss him off and wreck his turf. The whole goddamn flock was darting across rooftops and swinging through

his dam space. Meanwhile, Bruce was piloting the damn Batplane to try and put out fires and manage the spread of the rest. He wasn't happy being forced to "work" with them, but there weren't good alternatives.

"Tt… You knew something was going on, and your pathetic inability couldn't get a hold of the situation, and now we must fix it for you." Robin antagonized from the top of the nearest roof.

"Shut your mouth, you brat, or I'll shut it for you you," Red Hood scoffed as he lined a shot up and shot through two dickwads with his pistol, "I wasn't expecting 'burning the neighborhood to the ground' to be part of the fucking turf war. It's not normally a step that's taken when overthrowing powers, but if they wanna play with fire, they're going to learn that trying to burn me ends badly."

"You'd know all about criminal affairs, wouldn't you?" Robin scoffed, moving away from Hood's confrontation after Hood made a motion as if he was going to shoot at him.

"To be fair, we all do. It's our job," Red Robin threw back over coms, "And move away from him. You're supposed to keep a strong distance tonight. You're lucky he didn't shoot you on sight, and even luckier you're not on the main channel or B would have your hide."

"Still, this is kinda weird. Hood's right, it's not really normal behaviour for the gangs in his area," Signal called out as he cracked a gun out of an assailant's hand.

"It's worth looking into seeing as—" Nightwing cut himself off as the scream of a little girl came through coms along with gunshots, "That sounds about five blocks south of my location. I'm on route."

"I'll circle around and meet you there," Red Robin called back, "Robin, get back from Hood."

"Tt, as you say, Failure," Robin scoffed, already having moved seven blocks east, "The screams were near Hood's location, if you care to know, but as I have bowed to your infinite wisdom, I cannot be of assistance."

“Whatever will I do when I am free from your demonic presence hanging over my life like a dark cloud? A kick flip, probably.”

“I will end you.”

“You can continue to try and fail, Demon Brat.”

Nightwing wasted no time in bounding over the rooftops and scanning below for stray kids as the gunshots kept firing.

Tim grit his teeth and ignored the urge to kill the Demon Brat as he caught sight of a kid and a scrawny dude who looked like he was on the brink of collapsing carrying someone who was unconscious.

“Nightwing, on me,” Red Robin called out before swinging down in the distance and landing in the road.

He held his hands out in surrender as a messy black haired teen with a woman hefted over his shoulder jerked a cyan-haired kid behind him at the movement of him landing.

“Easy, I’m here to help.”

The boy relaxed a little bit. He carefully let the little girl come out from behind him.

“Can you get them out of here? Her mom needs a hospital. Smoke inhalation,” The teen asked, shifting something under his sweater. A backpack, if he had to guess.

“We can,” Tim nodded, bringing a hand up to his ear, “Hey B, I’ve got someone who needs a medevac here, a mom and a child,” He said as Nightwing swung in.

“Heidi McMillain and her daughter Jesse,” The boy said as Nightwing approached, carefully reaching for the mom. The boy passed her over as carefully as he could.

“Get ready to grapple in on the next pass. I’m on my way,” Batman responded.

“What about you?” The little girl demanded.

“Hey, I’m getting out too,” The boy laughed softly, and grabbed her shoulders as he kneeled. What the hell happened to that kid’s hands? “Just not with these guys. They’re gonna have their hands full getting you two to safety and getting your mom some help.”

The boy gave her a nudge. He clearly hadn’t expected her to turn and give him a hug.

Tim knew from the expression on Dick’s face that he wasn’t the only one that caught the flash of agony across his face.

“You’re the best, Dumpster.”

“Get going,” He pulled away with a smile, and Jesse ran over to Tim, giving the vigilantes ample time to spot the torn and bloodied fabric on his right side. Tim didn’t react. Clearly the kid, Jesse, hadn’t noticed, and he refused to freak her out. He picked her up and sat her on his hip.

“Nice to meet you, Jesse. Better hang on,” Tim directed, letting her cling as Batman thundered closer.

Danny stood up, not wanting to make eye contact with the heroes as they prepared to leave. He turned his bloody side away so Jesse wouldn’t see, and watched the heroes grapple into a low flying plane with scary efficiency. They looked back out at him from the opening of the plane with a look of suspicion that he did *not* like.

Nightwing carefully set the woman down gently, checking her vitals before moving up to Batman quickly.

“Hey, B, we gotta go back and get that kid,” Dick whispered, “That kid was shot.”

“Shot?” Batman inquired, turning the plane around.

“At least twice. Must’ve blocked Jesse,” Nightwing murmured.

“Go get him. I’ll make another pass.”

Nightwing nodded, moving to the side of the plane, giving a nod to Tim before he dove out in a free fall. He waited as long as had to before shooting his line, and swung down in a deep curve before flipping onto the pavement.

“Kid! Kid! Uh, Dumpster!? Dumpster?! Damn, that feels mean… Hey! Dumpster! You can come out, I’m here to get you out of here!”

Dick could see nothing from the streets, and even getting up onto the roofs that weren’t on fire couldn’t help him find the black haired blue eyed kid with bullet holes.

“Nightwing, did you just call someone a dumpster?” Spoiler snickered.

Dick scowled, “Look, I’m not making fun of him. That’s what the kid called him.”

“Pretty sure that’s just bullying,” Signal tacked on from his sector, “Clear over here, police line moving in, fire fighters following behind, and gang members are being taken into custody.

“Yeah, well, I can’t find him around the area we literally just left him in for two minutes, and he’s got what I’m assuming are bullet wounds. Red can’t chime in because the kid he was with didn’t notice and we don’t wanna freak her out, but the kid's side was definitely torn up, and wasn't looking that great,” Dick frowned, peering into all the adjacent alleys in between the small business and apartments, “Kid had to be pumped on so much adrenaline because he had a one hundred and sixty pound woman in a fireman's carry, and was running through the street with Jesse after apparently rescueing them from a fire.”

“This teenager must have run through their burning building to retrieve them then,” Robin commented.

“Probably has some burns on him too,” Signal figured, quickly forcing the group he was fighting with to submit, “Especially if he made multiple trips into a burning building.”

“You guys are missing the fact that a teen with bullet holes in his side is missing in action!”

Naturally, when the chaos was finally under control and reports were rolling in, Barbara kept track of any unusual findings.

When the Fire Marshall reported a fifth floor apartment in the Lower Alley had been barricaded from inside the apartment, it already would’ve been flagged as unusual. No one had been found inside, and the windows were opened. It would’ve counted as a bizarre finding even if it hadn’t been the address of Heidi and Jesse McMillain.

When she sent the report to the Bat Cave, she could practically feel Bruce sprouting gray hair.

The family had been avoiding the Bat Cave due to Tim spiraling about how the only way that this “Dumpster” kid could have rescued Heidi and her daughter was if he scaled the bricks

outside, and how it would match the kid's injured hands a week and a half after the initial rescue. Dick was just about ready to sedate him so he could get some sleep. He was not prepared to deal with this shit over cereal whenever Tim came up to hog the coffee machine.

No one reported to any hospital or clinic with bullet rounds in their right side under his description in the following week.

The Wayne Foundation's Emergency Relief Fund was already hard at work repairing homes at a break-neck speed. Even with workers prowling the Alley to rebuild and help those who needed it, no one found anyone matching the injured teenager's description in the immediate aftermath, dead or alive.

Red Hood was something none of the Robins brought up to Batman after the final death toll of gang members came in, though Damian would later bring up to Dick, in the privacy of the game room, that there was no way to know how many people Hood actually killed due to the mass amount of firearms that had been scattered through the streets. Dick took it as a sliver of hope instead of the insult to Hood's prowess that it was meant to be. He continued to play video games in the tense manor, so Damian wasn't left alone to deal with it on his own. Duke avoided the manor whenever he could because the energy in the cave was too weird for him to deal with. Steph mostly bugged Barbara about things instead of the manor.

Word on the street was quiet, but it said that Red Hood was really hurting, and the blow to Crime Alley really fucked him and his operation up. That was the word that reached the ears of the Bats.

The whisper on the street, told between figures hunched down in camps and whispered among well wishes for recovery from the fire was something a little different. Red Hood was pissed. Red Hood was coming. The fire couldn't have crippled his gang if almost all the members made it out alive. The fact that Hood made damn sure that every opposing gang member he came across died a gruesome death for going against his rules was no surprise.

One of Jason's higher ups ended up taking in Jesse while her mom was down for the count, and since Andrew lived in the same building as the McMillains, he and Jesse had temporarily moved into Red Hood's dock warehouse that Andrew typically took care of. Jason was glad he made damn sure that Bruce couldn't be sure who did or did not work for him. His folk were good people, and didn't need a furry haunting them form the corner of their bathrooms whenever they got up at ass o'clock at night to piss. Bruce could keep his nose out of Jason's business.

Jason scowled a little behind his helmet as he walked into the office of the warehouse only to see Ike's runner and Andrew's temporary shadow, Jesse, in the chair behind the desk with the thirteen year old rough and tumble red head on top of the main office's desk

"Hey, brat. Outta my chair," Jason said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

Ike glanced up from where she was hunched as Jesse swung around in the chair, phone in hand and actively switching between text chains.

"Hey, Hood!" Ike grinned, "Sorry, were jus' tryin' to find someone."

"Oh yeah? Who's not accounted for?" Jason asked, shutting the door behind him and shooing Jesse out of his chair. She repocketed her phone and joined Ike on the desk, "You should consider yourselves lucky that this office isn't trapped."

They ignored him, but Jason knew that it was more out of not wanting to acknowledge that fact than any disrespect.

"Hey, this is Andrew's office. We can sit where we wanna," Ike grumbled, ignoring the smack from Jesse as she continued, "Technically speakin', no one's missing."

"He's a kid too! Just because he's one of the older ones doesn't mean anything. You gave him the okay to be on the turf Hood trusted you to run."

“Sure, but it’s not like he runs with us,” Ike denied.

“Nah, but he keeps giving us protein bars and shit, soooo,” Jesse sassed, “And he saved me and mom.”

“This is Snacks, right?” Hood interrupted, sitting down in the chair, “The backpack-under-the-sweater kid?”

“Yeah,” Jesse nodded, “And if he made his way out of the trash fire, then I should be able to find him. It’s been almost two weeks, though, and nothin’. He’s just gone.”

Ike scowled and brought her feet up so she was sitting criss-cross on top of the desk.

Jason leaned forward and propped his elbows on his knees, “And that’s not normal for him? A dodgy homeless kid?”

“Two weeks without seein’ us? Sure,” Ike shrugged, “Two weeks without anyone seeing him? No. Not since he got to Gotham.”

“Andrew asked around too once he was sick of me talkin’ about it while he’s trying to enjoy his coffee, and Mr. Hotshot Lieutenant can’t even find anything,” Jesse added, “And I know for sure that Nightwing went back for him. He couldn’t find Tommy anywhere. They thought I couldn’t hear, but Nightwing yelling for Dumpster is something you can absolutely make out when you’re sitting right next to Red Robin and his ear piece. Also lots of laughing.”

Jesse crossed her arms with a frown, and Jason sighed softly inside the helmet, but it didn’t get picked up by his modulator.

“I’m not doubting you two, but are you sure he won’t just turn up on his own?”

“He might, but we’re still gonna keep looking… If only to keep everyone else off my back,” Ike grumbled, "Seriously, over half of my guys have sent people to clinics, and this is what they demand from me? Cruel."

# Second chances aren’t always what they’re cracked up to be, but what’s new when you're a critically endangered species being hunted with extreme prejudice

Danny didn’t risk it. Danny couldn’t risk it. He tucked himself out of sight the second the Bats had turned their backs.

He threw his back against the wall of a Vietnamese Restaurant and willed himself to fade from view. White hot pain flared up throughout his back and side at the sudden pressure, and he held in his scream as he shuffled away as a plane circled back over head. He clutched his side and broke out into a rushed sprint when he heard a clatter and footsteps running on the pavement behind him.

Danny held his panic in and squeezed his side as he bolted in a full sprint when he heard Nightwing begin to call out for him. He ignored the tears of pain dripping down his cheeks in favour of fleeing in and out of the shadows of a city in turmoil. He didn't bother keeping track of where he was going beyond keeping an ear out for suspicious sounds like gunshots and vigilantes. After continuing to almost trip over errant trash bins and abandoned items, he was forced to slow right down to a limp, but did his best to keep moving. His legs shook with every step against the old, uneven asphalt. Danny bunched the sweater against his side in the middle of a block of burning establishments. He tumbled into the nearest alley and had no choice but to kneel in the middle of the space.

He could feel the boiling heat front he buildings on either side of him, and the entire gap between buildings shimmered in a haze, though Danny couldn’t tell if it was from the pain and blood loss or the heat. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to know. He let the feeling of intangibility trickle down his body in a mockery of the blood escaping from his side and pulled off his sweater and t-shirt.

Danny let his backpack swing off through his arms as he pulled it in front of him. He wasted no time in sticking his hand through the fabric and pulling out the old first aid kit. He set it aside and flipped it open with a slow breath. He didn’t bother unzipping it. There was too much he didn’t want to leave behind if he had to flee.

Shirtless in an alley that was, for once, not doused in shade, but alight with the roar of hellfire, Danny could see how much he fucked up his side.

What would've been three bullet holes were three open tears in his side, and while he healed faster, what he didn't need was a wound like this that would take at least a month to heal.

But he was lucky. Also half dead. That second one helped way more than it should.

"Alright… Alright. Yeah. Yeah. Uh, frogs. Frog dissection day with those little robo-frogs…"

He murmured to himself as he dumped iodine over his hands and his side and held in most of a scream as Danny pinched his side together to secure it. A low-pitched cry filled the alley, but didn't echo past the alley. He counted it as a win through the stars in his vision, and used his shirt to catch fluids as they leaked down his body. He tried to pretend he was in one of Casper High's shitty science rooms. Sam and Tucker were close by, and it's dissection day. He could hear Tucker tease Sam about animals and her ultra-recyclo-vegetarianism.

*Dissection…*

"It's just fake frogs…" Danny whispered. His hands shook as he rested a hand on his stomach.

He inched across his stomach lightly, practically praying that they'd be close enough to the surface of his skin. They weren't.

"I'm lucky," Danny nodded as he took a breath.

"I'm lucky," He whispered as he let his arm begin to pass through his stomach.

"I'm lucky," His scraped and burnt hands carefully passed around the smooth outer parts to his intestine as he carefully located the bullets and collected them one by one. Danny ignored the phantom outline of his kidney as he passed his hands through the warm tissues.

“I’m so *fucking* lucky,” He tried to convince himself as his other hand followed along and carefully froze any nicked tissues within his organs. Danny hoped it would be enough to heal on it’s own.

He doused his wounds with iodine and hoped for the best as he squished everything together, tacked it shut, packed the area with gauze, and wrapped it as snuggly as he could.

He shoved the first aid box through the backpack, and pack to the pocket of space at the bottom. Danny pulled a darker shirt from the bag, and put it on as slowly as he could before sliding on his backpack. Danny tucked his purse between him and the backpack in its usual position, and pointedly ignored the flashes of breath-taking pain. He did his best to pretend the movements weren’t harder to do with his jerky movements.

Danny folded forwards and let himself curl around his gut. He kneeled there in the alley listening to his heart race to the roar of the flames before he forced himself up onto unstable legs.

He swayed to the street with his black sweater tucked under one arm and his shirt held loosely in the other. He chucked his ruined shirt into the burning remains of a laundromat he'd spent a few nights in as his clothes were cleaned. He should probably do the same with his sweater, but blood on black isn't as noticeable, and it was Sam’s. He’d fix it.

He was watching his shirt burn as he could hear that stupid… what was it called? Batplane? And it was coming back over from the direction of the harbor. A sleek black high-tech plane. He would not be telling Tucker about it. Danny tried to ignore it in the distance.

He shuffled back into the alley, wanting nothing more than to sleep it off as he pulled out a canister of Fenton Decontamination Spray from is spot in the first aid kit, gave it a shake, and sprayed it over his make-shift surgery site to make sure any ectoplasm in his blood would break down. The bottle was already half-empty from getting blood all over a bathroom in Nebraska and having to clean it up. Bleach was fine, but it wasn’t enough for ectoplasm. Dad made hand sanitizer for the lab, tried making it ghost proof, and technically succeeded. Danny pretended it wasn’t one of his parents' more terrifying inventions. He made sure his parents never knew it worked.

“Dad is the smartest idiot I know,” Danny murmured as he stared down at his bloodied hands. He could hear the fast approaching sound of water crashing down, “And yet, here I am half naked in the streets of Gotham, and about to have water dumped on me by Batman himself.”

Danny groaned as the Batplane flew over the alley.

“Goes to show I’m the dumbest in my family even after getting… disowned,” He huffed as he watched the water fall down towards him.

The wall of water descended quickly. The fire’s aggressive flickering below shined through the water, lighting it like lava. Danny knew the crushing weight and pressure of the water would knock him to the ground. If he was honest, a stiff wind would probably do the same if the way the alley bricks were beginning to swirl and spin were any indication.

He let out a weak laugh. Danny crumpled to his knees and waited for it to hit his face. For it to drench him completely.

He waited. He frowned and squinted up at the water.

“Hey, wait a second…”

Flames were frozen in place. The wall of water above him didn’t fall any closer. Danny twisted his head and peered over his shoulder with a cheeky smile. The Master of Time floated behind him in his old man form with one hand on his staff.

“Hello, Danny.”

Danny couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled out of his throat.

“Hey Clockwork, can I nap in your tower for a while? I feel like shit, and I really wouldn’t mind a Time Out,” The injured halfa asked softly.

The ghost smirked, “I believe that can be arranged.”

Danny smiled weakly at the baby. He wanted nothing more than to lay down for days. He wanted…

He wanted… *but* …

He *had* to…

“Clockwork?”

“Yes, Danny?” The Master of Time asked serene from above, backlit by his signature portal.

“What about any others? What about the kids? I can’t just go if they need me,” Danny murmured.

“You’ve done all you can here,” Clockwork dismissed, “What about *you*?”

“I’m fine, for your information,” Danny protested as he ignored his shaking legs and dimming vision.

“Sure, I believe you.”

“... I can do more, Clockwork.”

“Can you? Yes, you can. You’re Danny Phantom,” Clockwork waved his staff, opening a familiar portal and swinging his hand in an “after you” motion, “Let's take this discussion

back to my lair, shall we?”

He stared up at the Master of Time for a while before Danny sighed, and resigned himself to Clockwork always being… Clockwork. Always being right. The knot of tension in his chest loosened as he felt the rings around his body and expand outwards. The comfort of the hazmat suit and the backpack disappearing from his back felt as good as climbing into bed after pulling a twenty four-hour Doom marathon. He sighed softly at the lack of pulling in his stomach thanks to the pull of his ribs, and let himself float up and through the portal.

“Today sucked,” He grumbled much to the amusement of the immortal ghost as he passed through Clockwork’s passageway.

“While I have no furniture, you’re welcome to help yourself to the floor,” Clockwork hummed, floating in behind Danny, “From what I’ve seen, that’s probably more comfortable for you than your usual accommodations as of late.”

“Of course you’ve been keeping an eye,” Danny grumbled, though he did drift down to the floor and lay down flat on his back.

It was a large space with gigantic moving cogs everywhere. Some cogs on the walls didn't look like they were connected to anything but durned anyways. Danny wouldn’t have dared to try and stop them from moving anyways.

“I am always watching, Danny. You know that. I see everything,” Came the quiet admonishment from his… mentor? Maybe. Considering Danny saw Clockwork more than most ghosts did, he felt like he could claim that, yeah. Mentor.

Danny made a soft noise of acknowledgement and tilted his head to watch little baby Clockwork check on things far out of Danny’s realm of expertise.

“Yeah, I do. I kicked my own ass so you’d leave mine alone,” He hummed and watched the cogs spin their way around the room, though that had to be his mind playing tricks on him because he knew they didn’t do that.

He was glad he was laying on the floor, “I kicked Pariah Dark’s ass too. Looking back, I think Dan was tougher. And cooler, but, like, horrifyingly cooler. Only in hindsight. Pariah Dark was just a tyrant.”

Danny stared up at the impossible space of Clockwork’s tower.

“Dan was a tyrant who knew how to use his power, and that’s scary,” Danny murmured, “And he was… stronger… Tricked him into the thermos, really. Pariah just got pushed back to bed. Big, ugly toddler.”

Clockwork smirked at the young halfa’s exhausted, pained rambling.

When he turned around some time later, The white haired teen was fast asleep curled up on his uninjured side with his back to Clockwork.

The Master of Time left him be.

“There is something we need to discuss, Danny.”

Danny frowned from his spot sitting with his legs crossed in the middle of Clockwork’s floor. The human pulled the needle through the holes in the sweater as he worked on stitching the bullet holes shut with some of the fishing line he kept in the first aid kit.

“Uh-huh, we always do,” Danny said, moving the fabric around as he checked over the section of stitches and knotted off the string as he moved to the next hole, “You never visit me without having a reason.”

Clockwork chuckled and hummed playfully, “Not always. There was that one time you convinced me to try Nasty Burger.”

“You didn’t even eat it, you just stared at me,” Danny corrected, “And I had to track you down, not the other way around. Whenever you track me down, it’s always for a purpose.”

“Semantics. Maybe this time I just wanted to offer you some time to rest,” The eternal embodiment of time said from his place in front of his viewing window.

“Doubt it was all you wanted even if it was a reason, but thanks.”

Clockwork smirked and flew slowly down. He hovered in front of Danny with his beard grazing the floor, “You brought up a couple days ago how you defeated Pariah Dark.”

“... And?” Danny asked with suspicion.

“I just wanted to be the first person to offer my congratulations. That’s all,” The older ghost said as he changed into his adult form.

“Uh… I think you’re a little late for that?” Danny scrunched his nose, “That was a while ago?”

“No, you received thanks. This is me acknowledging your accomplishment for defeating Pariah Dark in single combat.”

“You know, Clockwork?” Danny started, putting the needle and thread down as he glanced up, “You’ve got this smug energy that lets me know I’m not going to like what you're hinting at, and that you know that I know, but that you can’t wait to see it anyways. I’m not going to give you that satisfaction.”

Danny ignored the growing smugness from Clockwork as he continued on, “I’m sixteen, I just got shot, my parents and the government want me strapped to a lab table, and the best vacation I’ve ever had is being homeless and running away. I’m tired. I want to finish sewing Sam’s sweater, go find Cujo for some snuggles, and take another nap.”

“If that is what you wish, Danny, then I’m pleased to tell you all that may be arranged,” Clockwork acknowledged off-handedly, “Effective: the moment you defeated Pariah Dark.”

Danny kept his face perfectly neutral as he looked back down and took a couple minutes to finish the line of stitches through the last of the tears before he tied off, snapped the thread, and through the bloodied hoodie at Clockwork.

It never actually hit Clockwork, but that wasn’t the point.

“Pariah Dark is sealed away, not destroyed, if you’re implying his creepy castle is mine.”

“ *Am* I implying that the moment you defeated the last King of the Infinite Realms in single combat that his castle became yours, Danny?” Clockwork asked way too casually.

Danny took a breath and released it slowly as the figure in front of him shrunk into a shit-kicking buck-toothed kid again. The only sound to fill the space was the clicking of Clockwork’s cogs.

“If you’re saying what I think you are, you better not be,” Danny glared.

“I’ve no idea what you’re referring to, Your Majesty.”

“God damn it!,” Danny heaved his way up from the floor and crossed his arms, “No, I’m not. He’s still the same slumbering king as always!”

“I didn’t decide this, Danny Phantom. You did.”

“I absolutely *did not*,” Danny corrected, pointing up at the cloaked spirit, “I didn’t just wake up that day and decide ‘I’m gonna become king today, I think that’s a great idea!’ I decided I didn’t want the world to be fucking sucked into the Zone entirely!” Danny screamed, swinging his arms around as he spoke.

“Intention doesn’t matter,” Clockwork said softly. If Danny wasn’t pissed, he might’ve noticed the sympathetic tone, “The rules of the Infinite Realms dictate rulers to be decided in combat as ghosts are eternal regardless of whether or not they chose to have children, making lines of succession moot points.”

“I don’t want to be king! Did you not see how crazy the last fruitloop was?!” Danny yelled, gesturing vaguely behind him as if all the drama was clustered behind him.

“Then be different,” Clockwork dismissed with a smirk, “You have already decided you will not be a tyrant or destroy the world.”

Danny hated the way he could feel the wind leave his sails, and decided that he was going to attribute it to his wound. He rubbed at his face with a deep groan.

“The crown’s so fucking ugly… It’s not going to burn my hair, is it? Or make my hair into fire? I’ve got no interest in looking like Dan anytime soon!” Danny rambled, trying to ignore everything that was wrong with his life forr even just a moment.

“Of course it is not literal fire, Danny,” Clockwork comforted, “In regards to Dan’s hair: Considering Dan’s hair turned into ghostly fire after taking over Plasmius, and before he destroyed his Pariah Dark, I would say that you have nothing to worry about in that department.”

“At least there’s that,” Danny sighed. He paused after dragging his hands, and his brow furrowed as he replayed the sentence in his head, “... Wait, ‘before he destroyed his Pariah Dark’?! But you just… That means he was also…”

“That you were, at the very least, already a prince before defeating Pariah Dark because you defeated Dan, who was the Ghost King in his time?”

Danny couldn’t hold in his scream of frustration any more, and Clockwork floated back a few feet to watch the tantrum unfold with a smirk.

# Hallow'ed in the lies you tell yourself, be it in panic or in sickness, in order to stay floating in the bullshit chaos of life and undeath, the ancient knowledge waiting is simply, "Do what you can."

Chapter Notes

Due to nightshift, I don't think there's going to be an update next week

Danny took a good two hours to cool off. The fact that he was in the Zone and could blast floating chunks of rocks to smithereens helped immensely, even if it did no real favours for his recovery. It was easier to ignore with his snow white hair, glowing green eyes and hands, a hazmat suit, and an explosive temper, but he'd pay for the strain later.

The second he got back to Clockwork's tower, he cried. Clockwork hadn't seemed surprised, and spent five minutes rubbing the halfa's shoulders before Danny couldn't take it any more. Danny turned to Clockwork with distress written all over his features.

"I can't do this," Danny sobbed as he spiraled into a panic attack, "I can't spend eternity on the throne to go crazy alone!"

"Danny, you have a community of ghosts that are already close knit that bother you all the time. I highly doubt that will change," The ancient ghost soothed. He stroked his beard and opened his mouth to say something else, but Danny didn't want to hear it.

"You don't get it!" Danny screeched, smacking Clockwork's arm away from his shoulder. His eyes burned a toxic green through his tears.

"You don't get it! My parents are trying to dissect me as a regular ghost! And *you're* saying I'm the Ghost King!? Don't you get it? If it gets out, I'm toast, and the government will already be forever trying to dissect me without any additives like *King of a fucking Realm* ," Danny yelled through his crying.

He felt himself panic more at the slightly taken aback expression on Clockwork. Clockwork didn't make expressions like that. He just didn't. He was *Clockwork* . Master of Time and Sass.

The growing anxiety closed in around his throat. His own reality squeezed his chest like a tightening vice grip.

"Sam, Tucker, and Jazz are going to die one day, and I'm going to be alone, and at least in Dan's future he could be angry about it!" Danny cried out, and yanked his hair as he tried and failed to slow the panic. He took quick, heaving breaths as he screamed, "I'm going to be *running* for the rest of my *life* ! I was already going to lose everything slowly, and be forced to watch. And *now* ?!"

Danny broke into wet sobs at the strangely forlorn expression that Clockwork was giving him, and wrapped his arms around his stomach, "And right now? I can't *deal* with that, Clockwork!"

Clockwork gave the child some space to breathe, and didn't interrupt the expression of his devastation. Clockwork just floated next to Danny in silence as the minutes passed by. The sobbing and screams teetered on the edge of the teen's ghostly wail, but Clockwork paid no mind to the haunting echo as it bounced around his tower. It was only when the sobs settled into something that sounded consistently less desperate that Clockwork broke his silence.

"Now, assuming they don't stubborn their way into being ghosts, you still have Dani, don't you?" Clockwork pointed out gently, "She's stable, and she's already half-ghost."

Danny shuddered and gasped, wiping his face as he did his best to hold in a bout of sobs, "I can't ask her to be at my side all of eternity," Danny pushed his tears away with the heel of his gloved palms, "She hates staying in one place after Vlad's bullshit."

"Maybe so, but she'll be there. You *will* have someone from your family."

Clockwork let the silence settle back over them, and gave Danny a moment to process things.

"...Cujo, too," Danny swallowed and nodded, as he tried to slow his breathing down, “And you. Can’t seem to get rid of you.”

“Even if I could get rid of you, you know how to find my tower,” Clockwork bemoaned.

“Please,” Danny chuckled as more tears rolled down his dirty cheeks, leaving grief marks more evident than Danny’s wail, “I know you like me. Admit it, I won you over. Between me, my annoying friends, my psychologist in training smartiepants of a sister, and my clone-cousin, I’ve brought you more excitement than you’ve had in years.”

“Very true,” Clockwork allowed and teased with a cheeky smile, “Seems to me that you aren’t alone, and, as you’ve shown me, the future is always in motion.”

Danny shrugged as Clockwork pulled away. He took a deep breath and sighed as he rubbed the upper parts of his arms to reassure himself.

“Sorry, this is just… a lot,” Danny murmured.

“Don’t be.”

Silence fell for a few moments more before Danny spoke, “Do I seriously have to wear the ugly crown? I fucking refuse.”

Clockwork avoided the question as he laughed, “There is also the matter of the accompanying Ring of Rage.”

“Uh, yeah, no,” Danny snorted, “Listen, anything that’s going to give me anger management issues is off the table. Besides, if I take that with me, won’t someone be able to clock that ooze of ecto-energy?”

Clockwork stroked his floor-length beard as he changed into a toddler, “The ring is your best option. Until you learn to do it on your own, the crown and ring can make portals to the Ghost Zone. Out of the two items, the crown is the one that, ah, ‘oozes’ the most energy. It *is* named for the physical manifestation of its aura around it, after all.”

Danny frowned as he thought it over, “... So I’m stuck with the ring.”

Clockwork just stared at him with his usual smirk as Danny sat in his slow acceptance of the situation.

“Fuck... I’m still not the king.”

“Of course not.”

Danny found himself being only mildly anxious as he left Clockwork’s lair and ventured into the very center of the Zone in search of Pariah Dark’s, well, uh, *his* lair.

That Pariah Dark apparently occupied as a tenant, but lost the right to outright ownership.

It was a weird thought, and staying focused on it would send Danny into a second panic attack, so he refused to acknowledge it any more than he already had to. As far as he was concerned, nothing had to change.

He flew the endless toxic green and glanced at designs on the doors that he passed by until doors stopped appearing all together and the area darkened to a deeper toxic green than normal with the oppressive power exuding from the lair at the center of the area. A big red

castle with skulls, architecture that couldn't possibly be structurally sound in the human world, and the most aggressive "fuck you" energy Danny had ever had to deal with stood on a floating island that was blacker than the space around it in an unwelcome but familiar sight.

Honestly, he figured Sam would be the one to get a goth castle to live in, yet here he was. A creepy castle for a creepy kid.

"I really don't like it here," Danny grumbled.

He floated down to the scorched stone below and followed a path worn away by millennia of patrol by the other tenant of the castle that Danny definitely wasn't looking forwards to seeing. He just hoped the royal guard of the king wouldn't attack the new guy for showing up.

A ring of light passed over the teen right before human feet in torn up and duct-taped sneakers touched the rock and walked up the worn path through the arched doors.

Inside the crimson hall were dozens of skeletons lining the walls, weapons at the ready. Danny knew they'd make their move if he did anything to incur their wrath. Like stealing the Soul Shredder Blade. That… had been a stupid idea. Who even steals the sword of the Spirit of Halloween?!

Danny Fenton, apparently.

Heard that kid is a fucking idiot.

"I forgot you guys were here… How… many are you? For no reason in particular, and definitely not so I know how many skeleton people are coming after me if I have to escape from this place," Danny asked, breaking the silence as he inched his way in.

They didn't move or respond as he peered down open Baroque-style halls in the ancient medieval castle, seeing more and more skeleton guards. The incongruity in the era's made the warped presentation more disturbing. Danny supposed the Lair adopted features from the last

time Fright Knight had run free in the world. He carefully backed up and continued past the main hall, pretending the shadows didn't make the ceilings look like they were dripping blood.

"Okay, okay, nothing to see here, just… coming to sight see, getting something I apparently left behind here, no biggie," Danny whispered to himself as he moved through the halls, heading deeper and deeper into the castle. He took the long way. No need to walk right into the Fright Knight's chamber if he could go around.

"I hate the fact that I know doors can be Baroque," Danny grumbled as he opened a heavy door engraved with a chaotic mess of chains and spikes. The stairway hidden behind was a stairway he'd rather not go down.

He knew he didn't want to go down.

But the crown and ring were stored with the sarcophagus. Considering everything, it might not have been the best move to hide ancient artifacts next to their holder, but the lower levels stayed sealed since Danny managed to stuff that tyrannical asshole back into his forever naptime.

The Coffin of Forever sleep was the only source of light in the space of the crawling catacombs halls. Danny found it ironic considering the Coffin of Forever Sleep had been the last shining beacon of hope for the Ghost Zone. The truth was that the aura it exuded was horrific, and Danny didn't like the way it made his nerves tingle with numbness or the way it seemed to suck his core into a deeper exhaustion the longer he was near the damn tomb.

The Crown of Fire was easy to spot from its place floating above the coffin, and if Danny had his way, it would stay there. He frowned and walked up to the base of the coffin. He crouched down, and reached his hand deep into the stone as he ignored the pulse of pain in his side. He fished his hand around until it made contact with the Ring of Rage. He ignored the spike of his emotions as he pulled it free.

"If I could, I'd kick Clockwork's ass. But I can't, so at least I get a portable portal out of it, so I can dump the thermos," Danny grumbled, ignoring the way the cold of his core burned in his chest as he clutched the stupid ring on his bare hand.

He glared up as he readjusted his shirt so it wasn't tugging at his bandages, and sat back on his heels. The coffin towered above him. Danny wished he had a marker on him so he could deface one of the beings making his afterlife hell. Pariah should consider himself lucky.

Danny heaved a sigh as he transformed. He slid the ring onto his left pinky finger and let his feet leave the ground as he drifted up.

"Ugh, big guy, I hate the way you mess with my ghost sense," He shivered and turned away from the coffin to get out of the glorified basement only to come face to face with his second tenant.

Danny shrieked at the sight of the Fright Knight mounted atop his alicorn. There was no glowing green sword present, but that wasn't as reassuring as it should've been, and Danny couldn't help but feel like Fright Knight had it anyway. He didn't. Maybe the constant paranoia of Gotham was getting to him. Clearly.

"Ha! Hey! I was just leaving! No trouble-making here, Halloweenie, so keep your pumpkins and your sword! I sooooo don't want it!" Danny yelled as he threw his hands up in surrender.

"Whelp," Fright Knight acknowledged in his advance.

"Listen, I, uh, I wasn't going to touch the coffin. I get your whole thing is causing terror and guarding this maniac, but if you're mad about me coming for the ring, you're gonna have to take it up with the powers that be, Mr. Tall, Dark, and Scary," Danny rambled, inching his way along the walls of the chamber the Coffin of Forever Sleep was stored in, but being careful not to fly higher than the opening to the stairway.

Fright Knight continued his advance, uncaring of Danny's slow escape as the halfa moved to the stairs, "You claim your ultimate ascendancy, yet flee from me?"

"Uh, just came to pay respects, collect a thing I was told to come get!" Danny rushed, scrambling up the stairs backwards, pulling himself up and ignoring the painful way he hit

his tailbone on one of the steps, “I don’t want to get skewered today and shown my worst nightmares. I’m a couple months away from having almost lived them in person, actually, and I just got shot. So, yep, just gonna go and not bother you. You can continue your eternal guard over the king and his resting place. It’s fine, really!”

Ancient leather creaked as the medieval terror swung his leg over the saddle and dismounted. Danny felt like he was borderline screaming as the Fright Knight began to ascend the stairs, alicorn mount vanishing behind him in his pursuit of the halfa.

The ominous green glow from the alicorn vanished as if in a wind, leaving only the painful indigo aura of the Knight in the dark of the cavern with the coffin’s haunting glow in the distance.

As Danny turned and fled, he missed the soft glow of green that flickered along the dark brick as he clawed his way up the stairs.

The teen crested the stairs and risked a look behind him into what may as well have been the depths of hell. Nothing. Danny could swear he felt his dead heart beat as he let out a soft sigh of relief. He was so focused on Fright Knight that he missed the cold rush of energy that left him along with the sigh. Danny turned forwards and darted strained into the armoured chest of the massive obsidian beast with hooves the size of his head.

Danny couldn’t hold in nor disguise the loud yelp from the contact nor the scream of agony as he fell to the black marble floor. As the waves of pain warped his vision, he could see the huge bat wings flap before folding in, and a mouth of terrifying teeth came closer to his face. The ground rumbled as the Fright Knight stepped out of the stairwell.

The twelve foot tall Ghost of Halloween towered over Danny as he lay sprawled across the polished surface. Danny couldn’t think past the pain keeping him from moving, and as darkness fell over his vision, the last thing he saw was a bright white pass over him and the flaming helmet of the Fright Knight looming closer and closer.

Danny officially hated the ring. Also bullets.

Apparently hours of intense physical activity after getting your insides ripped by bullets meant running from your enemies was a lot harder than normal. Who knew?

Danny could've guessed, but he blamed Clockwork for his misfortune regardless.

Danny hated Clockwork.

*No, he didn't.*

Danny wasn't expecting to wake up.

When he did, he expected to wake, say, in chains, or in a dungeon, or at the feet of his foe, primed and ready for bragging.

He wasn't, however, expecting to wake up curled on top of a cushion with his head on a pillow.

It was… nice. Danny shifted and went back to sleep.

The next time he woke up, something was playing around in his hair and breathing on him.

"Cujo… Cujo! Stop it, 'mere, boy, up… Cujo!" Danny grumbled, swatting the air above his head and patting the cushion next to him.

Danny may still have to listen to Sam, Tucker, and Jazz complain about this year's exam season, but he no longer had to participate. That meant that he shouldn't have to deal with

Cujo's excitement at Danny's exam-week all-nighters anymore. He sighed softly, and brought his hand to his mouth, giving a sharp whistle to get the little rascal's attention. After a moment, when nothing got up with him, Danny passed back out only to wake up some time later to Cujo licking his face and joining him on the bed.

It felt unbelievably nice to just hold Cujo and have him pressed against him. Guess he really did belong to Danny…

On a raised dais with black velvet curtains draped around the platform sat a massive throne made for a heavy, wide-set, giant of a being, though that being hadn't sat in it for quite some time. Instead, there was a small form laid on the cushion.

A skinny boy with black hair slept curled up on his uninjured side, with a backpack tucked under his filthy, bloodied sweater, ruined shoes pressed into the corner of the cushion of the backrest and the cushion of the arm, and grungy, ashen clothes pressed into the rich, pristine fabric of the chair. He snored quietly with one arm tucked to his chest, and the other draped over the edge of the velvet cushion. In the dim lighting of the great hall, the faint visage of a ring could be seen on the hanging hand. The mirage of the crown could be seen above his head if one was looking for it though Danny himself never grabbed it. Neither object seemed to remain visible, and the longer the boy slept, the less noticeable they were until they vanished from sight and didn't reappear.

The form lay relatively undisturbed over the time it slumbered, though a massive black, unholy Clydesdale with bat-like wings, a glowing bone-white horn, and teeth sharp enough to rend flesh from the bones of its enemies ruffled the boy's hair as it sniffed and played with the black locks. It vanished upon a half-asleep dismissal from the youngest King to ever rule.

Eventually, the form of a small green puppy with a pink squeaky toy held between his teeth bounded into the warped castle, following the whistle of his favourite person. The puppy shifted into a large, snarling dog as he entered the great hall and laid eyes on the black knight standing in the corner beside the dais.

Normally, Cujo would be the one to cower.

Normally, Fright Knight wouldn’t budge, but the King had called for his dog.

He moved away.

Cujo shrunk back once he was right in front of the throne, and scrambled up with his little legs. He made himself comfortable in Danny’s arms and stayed there as Danny slept and recovered.

# Sometimes jewelry ain’t your thing, but sometimes it’s just functional enough that you’re willing to make a concession to the No Suspicious Rings Rule

Chapter Notes

Sorry, I worked a lot these past two weeks and I am officially exhausted haha

When Danny woke up for the final time, he felt a lot better. The pain in his side was still there, but it wasn’t agonizing, and Cujo’s tiny frame was curled in his arms which made everything better.

The exhausted teen scrunched his nose at the smell of ghost puppy breath, but didn’t push the little mixed breed away from him. He pushed himself up and leaned back against his pillow which, now that he was more awake, was way too sturdy. An awkward stretch told him that it wasn’t a bed at all.

Danny quietly took in the giant chair he’d been curled on with Cujo. He was sitting in an ancient ebony wood chair with vague designs of skulls that looked like they were worn away with a deep green velvet cushion keeping him comfortable, still comfortable despite the millennia of wear. Maybe more comfortable because of it. It was… unsettling. Danny gently scooped up Cujo and looked around. There were swooping black curtains hanging around that seemed to faintly shift in some breeze, but tied back by silver rope bolted to the wall. It felt like they were sucking light into the heavy fabric, but it had to be a trick of the light because the longer Danny looked, the more it looked like there were little twinkling lights in the fabric. They seemed almost infinite as they pooled around the throne. The last time he’d seen the curtains of the dias, they'd felt so menacing and tattered.

Movement coming towards him caught his eyes. Danny looked up. Just beyond where the fabric was draped stood the dark visage of the Fright Knight.

“I… don’t suppose I could just be on my way, right?” Danny asked, warily staring at the weirdly silent entity.

“You will disclose to me wherefore lies your desired avoidance of my Soul in the shadows of nightmares past,” Fright Knight commanded.

Danny stared blankly at the knight and took a slow breath.

“I need you to understand that I flunked English,” Danny deadpanned, “Are you asking me… why I don’t want to be stabbed by the metaphysical nightmare sword? Or if I already lived my worst nightmares?”

“It is but only for me to dole out a soul’s worst nightmares,” The Fright Knight said in… afrontment?

“O…kay, the second option. Jeez, this is weird. You… aren’t attacking me,” Danny hummed, ignoring the mini-crisis at a foe who didn’t seem interested in attacking for once, “My parents found out I’m a ghost, and now they want to dissect me forever along with the American government. I ran away from home, so maybe avoid Amity Park? It’s just my friends, and you’re, uh, well, you’re fucking terrifying, and the more I read that book, the more I realized you were kind of fucking with us, and if you go back to Amity, it would be bad. I won’t be there to stop you. Wait, that sounds like I'm giving you ideas.”

Danny blanched, the realization of handing his foes the keys to a city that he literally couldn't go protect setting in as he stared down the swordless knight

“You have fled your haunting, Whelp?”

“Yep! It was that or torture for the rest of eternity, and I have no interest at finding out if I’d die after eighty or so years of it, assuming I can die of old age related causes,” Danny explained with dead eyes and a detached, flippant cheeriness, though he wasn’t sidestepping the reality of his situation.

He had to ignore how finally talking about it with the one being who could cause his nightmares to happen without handing him over to his pursuers felt nice. It replaced the usual impending doom he had when dealing with his peanut gallery.

“I demand the location of your new haunting grounds.”

“Uh? Well, first of all, I’m homeless now and technically don’t stay in one place anymore, but I’m seeing how long I can stay in this one place, but if someone figures out I’m a ghost, I’m screwed,” Danny scratched the back of his head as he rubbed Cujo’s belly, “So, uh, maybe don’t expose me please?”

“It is as He doth command,” The grim figure acknowledged.

Danny ignored the chills down his spine at the foreboding statement. He threw his feet off of the throne and hopped down.

“Great talk, very unusual but not entirely unwelcome. Minus passing out,” Danny said, shifting Cujo in his arms as he inched his way down the steps, “If it’s all the same to you, I, uh, I’m done here. Super sorry to bother you. Feel free to continue… whatever it is that you do?”

Danny moved through the hall, trying desperately to not ruin a gifted horse by putting his foot in his mouth or by showing anymore panic in the face of the essence of fear itself.

Maybe it was stupid to turn his back to a fruitloop that could wield a sword that sent you to a nightmare dimension and was formidableeven without it, but Danny did, and flew away after he transformed with Cujo tucked in his arms.

Maybe it was stupid to leave your back exposed, but he did. If Danny would’ve turned back at any time, he might’ve seen the fabled Fright Knight kneeling in reverence under the light of what seemed to be plastic glow in the dark stars that hadn’t been there before dangling from the high abomination of medieval-baroque ceilings.

But Danny didn’t even glance over his shoulder, he just flew away into the expanse of the Ghost Zone.

Danny smiled as he sat on one of the many floating isles of the Zone, throwing Cujo's pink bear into the void over and over and over again, occasionally playing tug of war with the spunky, rough and tumble pup.

"Thanks for finding me and for staying, even though I barely remember whistling for you," Danny chuckled as Cujo spun in a few circles and plopped down, waiting for the squeaky to be thrown. Danny didn't make him wait long. He chucked it into the ether and happily spent time with the stray dog.

He took some time to himself. Being somewhere that was pure ectoplasm after so long, the longest he'd ever been without significant amounts of ecto-contamination, especially since his accidental death, felt amazing and refreshing. He had no doubts his body was trying to compensate for damage he sustained (and also maybe was trying to correct the malnutrition, but if his injury was going to benefit the most from time in the Zone, he wasn't going to complain).

He released the contents of the thermos, and took cute pictures of Cujo playing with the new blobby additions to the Ghost Zone. One looked like a goldfish with legs, and Danny didn't know how to feel about it. He cooed over it anyways.

Cujo was chewing at his toy next to Danny while he stared where he knew the ring was on his hand. He knew it was there, but he couldn't see anything but a shadow of a ring unless he fully focused on actually seeing the damn thing. Otherwise, it seemed to just be a plain ring in between transformations.

"Not gonna lie, it's nice that I'm not going to have to worry about it. Hopefully it doesn't set off any scanners that Vlad or my parents have. Or the GIW. I hate those guys," Danny sighed, smiling down at Cujo, and rubbing behind his ears.

“The feeling of safety, like, actual safety, it’s nice. Yeah, I don’t have many actual friends here. Far more people here want me skewered, but they’ll also leave me alone here,” He looked out into the expanse as Cujo shook the toy around, “It’s kind of… It’s so tempting to just…”

*Stay. It’s a way out. Clockwork gave you a way out.*

“Be a good boy, Cujo. Don’t cause too much havoc. Or do. You’re your own dog, and I love and support you in whatever chaos you cause,” He snickered, pushing off of the island and floating in place.

*I don’t have to go. I can stay. I can. He gave me an out.*

“Okay! Time to go back to Gotham… uh…” He trailed off and stared at his hand, “You don’t… come with instructions. Can you please take me back to Gotham?”

Nothing.

Danny frowned, “Uh, Crime Alley in Gotham City, New Jersey, please?”

The ring didn’t even glow. He groaned as boiling anger that wasn’t his own tried bubbling up into his chest.

*I’d never have to run again.*

“Look. I get that I’m not Pariah Dark! I didn’t exactly choose this, now bring me to Gotham City,” Danny huffed, thinking of the fiery buildings and bloodshed he’d left behind, “Just. Somewhere out of the way in Gotham.”

Danny frowned, trying to keep a lid on the irrational growth of his anger, “Ring, open a fucking portal to god damn Gotham City, *please* .”

*It's a way out, you idiot. Stay here. Stay forever. Anything, just stay.*

"I just want to go to Gotham! Is that so much to ask?!" Danny screamed at his hand.

A green rip appeared in front of him, and Danny cheered, "Yes! Ha! Maybe this'll be easier than figuring out my other powers."

*They know what markers flare when a portal opens.*

He transformed midway through the portal so no one would see him as Phantom as he exited. The portal melted back to nonexistence behind him.

*They know those calculations by heart. So does he. So do I.*

He should've stuck his head through first to see what was on the other side.

*I could have stayed. Should have.*

He felt himself enter a free fall and screamed when he was mid air for more than two seconds, and hated the way he could hear it echo around the neighborhood. The aged brown bricks of an apartment building was racing up towards him. Not to meet him, no, but to pass him. He wouldn't neatly land on the roof.

Danny reached out and prepared to brace himself painfully. His hands caught the ledge of the building below and scraped into his hands. He hung for a moment as his side flared up, before he scrambled up onto whatever roof he'd ended up landing on. Danny gripped the ledge of the building and leaned over, taking as much of the weight off his side as possible.

"God damn it," Danny hissed. He looked out to the neighborhood's skyline.

The brightening sky told him it was early, probably closer to four than three, “Wonder if I’ll be able to make out the sunrise this morning or if it’s just going to look as toxic as always.”

“...I have no fucking idea where I am,” Danny hummed after a few minutes.

*Nothing would change even if he did.*

Danny swung his legs up and over, sitting on the ledge, and taking in the morning smog of maybe-Gotham. He relaxed, idly leaning forward to observe the neighborhood below as easily as the sky. It was a nice change from recent events, even if it meant he had to figure out where he was.

“Hey, kid. You wanna come away from that ledge for me?”

# The adventures of inconsistently parenting a technically-still-very-real-child-assassin-prince and trying to make test results make any modicum of fucking sense

Chapter Notes

You're all so kind and supportive. Here, I wanna release this super early.

Edit: Hey lovelies, so I'm having computer troubles (just my luck, I swear, oh my fricking goodness), so we'll see if next update comes on time or if its late or postponed. I'm really sorry, but it's going to be a surprise for every one of us.

When the chaos was finally under control, Bruce had Alfred phone Gotham Academy and pull Damian from school, citing that the heightened gang activity and extreme violence put the youngest Wayne in danger, and he'd be staying home where it was safest as a precaution. He was not the only rich kid to stay home either.

In reality, Bruce had decided being fully confined to the house, unable to participate in the investigation of the fire of Crime Alley or the gang war, was the best punishment he could give his youngest.

Damian al Ghul-Wayne was grounded.

Super grounded.

"Explain, Father."

"I *know* you went near Red Hood," Bruce scowled. He turned away from the screen of the cave's super computer and crossed his arms, "I explicitly said not to go anywhere near him, and, on top of that, you were antagonizing him! Damian, you know better than to go off and antagonize villains that can and will kill you with no hesitation!"

Damian grinded his teeth as he listened quietly. When Bruce was finished, Damian snapped back.

“I am more than capable of handling myself, or have you forgotten?”

“I could never forget what the League did to you,” Bruce dismissed, turning back to the computer as he continued, “You disobeyed a direct order and sought out contact with a homicidal maniac actively slaughtering other criminals. You’re grounded, and no temper tantrum will make me end it sooner.”

“It was you who insisted that the others are just as real a child to you as I am,” Damian accused with a step towards the towering form of an uncowled Batman, “That they are my brothers. That I attempt to reach out regardless of how I feel about them. That regardless of anything, they are my brothers, and that I am to acknowledge them as such, yet you sit here throwing your son away?”

“Jason’s changed,” Bruce snapped back over his shoulder.

Damian kept his expression still and unchanging in the face of his father’s hypocrisy.

“We can’t confirm how he came back, but he came back wrong. He’s a rampaging serial killer, with or without the Lazarus waters. He’s not my son.”

“And what of me?” He asked, posture loose and uncaring of whatever answer came,” Lazarus runs through my veins. I spilled my first blood before my first steps, and had my first kill soon after I could walk.”

Bruce insisted, “You’re different, Damian.”

“Are you so sure I am different?” The youngest of the brood challenged.

“You were raised that way, son. It’s not the same!”

“Pick, Father: Either all of the children are yours, or none of them are, since you love to insist that Grayson and Drake are just as yours as I am.”

“This is *different*, Damian.”

The frigid tone almost made Damian glad that he was wearing a long sleeved shirt, as irrational as the reaction was. The assassin prince didn’t budge. He stared down his Mother’s Beloved with eyes as cold as Batman’s anger.

“Are you trying to convince me or yourself?”

Damian gave no hint of a shift in emotion even as his Father’s anger rose. Bruce pushed himself up from the chair, black Kevlar pushing the well-used chair back and out of his way as he turned. Regardless of Damian’s own anger management issues, it was Bruce who couldn’t keep a grasp of his emotions, and Damian who had the perfect façade in this moment.

“Am I next, Father?” Damian asked pointedly, “Will you throw me away just the same?”

“*Damian*, go to your room!”

“How long may I expect it to be mine, *Father?* ” Damian asked with a cruel apathy.

“*Damian!* ”

Bruce made no further comment, but Damian knew he was livid. He turned and made his way up the stairs behind the ancient grandfather clock. He left his father to his anger and the delusion that Damian had less blood on his hands than Todd.

The only person who seemed to know for certain that he was grounded was Pennyworth. Whenever Damian caught the butler's gaze, there was a flicker of something that had taken him shamefully long to figure out for someone of his ability and intellect. It wasn't the usual disappointed look.

It was day sixteen of receiving the silent treatment from his father, whether it was intentional or not on the part of the Dark Knight, that he figured out the subtle expression Pennyworth was wearing glancing at Damian.

They'd just finished breakfast, and Father hadn't said a word to him other than "Good morning, Damian" even when Damian would offer up information about what he was doing that day. When Father responded to Drake and not him every day, Damian knew the older boy would either deduce that he was grounded or believe they had another fight. Either would be correct.

He'd passed by the kitchen to make tea before heading to his room to complete whatever little amount of work he had left from his teachers despite the amount of work he'd received for his absence. Pennyworth was finishing the dishes, and had looked at Damian when his back was turned to leave. He would've missed it had he been anyone else, but he was an al Ghul.

It was one Pennyworth had often worn, but one Damian could never pin down.

It was the extra box of Richard's favourite sugary cereal after a fight with Father or a hard time at the Bludhaven Police Department.

It was a Gotham University sweater when Thomas had received his final grades and GPA that showed he'd be able to get into any program he wanted to.

It was refilling Drake's empty mug with coffee that wasn't decaf despite it being day five of Drake not sleeping because he was working on some important release at Wayne Enterprises when Father was too busy to do it himself.

It was adding decorations to a spare room in the manner for Brown when she'd first began leaving her possessions over.

It was the lack of judgement when Cain had attacked a civilian for their body language towards her and sent them to the hospital when she'd first arrived at Wayne Manor.

It was a look rarely, if ever, directed at himself.

It was support.

Damian couldn't decide if he resented it for being far too late, or if it was a welcome change from the stares of disappointment he received for fighting with his so-called siblings.

Tim wasn't sure if the demon was grounded or if he was deciding to be more secluded than usual outside of playing video games with Dick, but Tim wasn't complaining about the lack of insults and general assholery that usually came par for the course when dealing with Damian.

In fact, the insomniac was using his Damian-free time pouring over some weird blood analysis results that had popped up.

They'd swabbed as much of the blood in the Alley as they could to scan for any of the usual markers for the Rogues. Fear toxin, Joker toxin, Venom, anything.

Other than the usual run of drugs, nothing odd was picked up until one unknown blood sample that didn't match anyone in the computer's database. That alone wasn't enough to pique Tim's curiosity. No, it was the unknown chemical compound that was abundant in the blood that had caught the young detective's attention, enough to be retested.

“Find something, Tim?”

Tim didn’t bother turning to Bruce as he poured over the results for what had to be the hundredth time since he’d first read the analysis, “I’m not sure? It feels like something, but I don’t think it’s connected to our investigation. There’s a compound in here I’ve never seen before. The computer can’t generate a complete list of chemicals or even trace elements.”

Bruce frowned and moved over to where Tim was hunched over the desk. The teen was sitting with one leg curled under him and the other bent up for him to use to keep his head propped up towards the screen so his hands were free to fly across the keyboards.

“So run the tests again.”

“I did that already. I even added more tests onto it, but there’s an issue with running more tests that I can’t exactly avoid,” Tim grumbled.

Bruce rested a hand on his shoulder, “And that is?”

“The original analysis is the only viable analysis we have.”

“Tim,” Bruce started gently, mindful of the heavyset bruises below his son’s eyes, “We still have the blood sample. We can just run more tests.”

“This is true. However, running tests again, no matter what tests I run, tells me only two things, and neither makes any logical sense.”

“And that is?”

“That we had a blood sample, and that it is no longer a viable sample to analyze,” Tim explained.

“What does that mean, Tim?” Bruce frowned, looking over the screen as it flashed between windows and information until it settled on three result summaries.

“This is the first result. That one’s the twelfth result. That last summary over there to the far right is the sixty-second result,” Tim began.

Bruce glanced through them as Tim began to explain.

“It was definitely a blood sample when we first collected and tested it when we finally got home that night, but despite it being, for all intents and purposes, a fresh blood sample having only been at most hours old, it already showed incredibly bizarre results. Nothing I can think of could even come close to whatever that compound would be,” Tim explained, “After running the tests again and again and again as soon as I received the originals, the only thing left to find was that the sample was no longer viable. DNA markers were completely destroyed. I can only attribute it to the unknown compounds in the blood, and I can only assume that whatever compound was in the blood was what was causing that incredible chemical breakdown.”

“Is there any way we can reconstruct the DNA?”

Tim shook his head and smushed his cheek against his knee as he looked over at Bruce, “Due to the sheer volume of samples, and the purpose of collecting them in the first place, documenting the sequences like that wasn’t necessary. We were just looking for signs of the Rogues Gallery. When I ran the second test, there wasn’t enough left to even get a partial sequence.”

Bruce kept looking at the results Tim had pulled up, and noted the concerning decay between the first test and the twelfth. It was barely picking up traces of blood. By the sixty-second result, there was absolutely nothing discernable.

He furrowed his brow and frowned.

“I’d bet that no person we arrested would match this blood sample,” Bruce pondered. He missed the concerned expression on Tim’s face as he dissected the information presented before him, “I think we’re dealing with a new threat. A meta, most likely. One with disturbing powers. If the blood sample decayed like that, who’s to say what happened to the body of the individual. Whether it’s connected specifically with the gang activity or not can’t be decided for sure yet.”

“I don’t think we’re dealing with another villain, Bruce,” Tim disagreed softly.

Bruce glanced down to see a sad expression on his adopted son’s face.

Tim stared at the screen of the Batcomputer. The harsh blue light glinted back at him. The Batcomputer was used to tragedy. It held information on millions of murders, assaults, attacks, missing persons reports, suspicious deaths and events, and more. There was a sad solace to it most nights. It felt a lot like the last bastion of hope for those lost beyond reasonable reach, something Bruce knew all too well, but there was somethings that even being the best detective in the world with the best supercomputer in the world wouldn’t fix, and Tim could feel the desolation rise in his chest.

He didn't want to voice the conclusion he’d been forced to come to because the cold truths of the tragedies that heroes couldn’t fix would be something he couldn't ignore.

Tim knew what exhaustion looked like all too well. Knew what running on empty looked like.

On top of that, Tim had seen Kon get ill after missions where he’d come into direct contact with kryptonite, and violently ill if the exposure was repeated excessively or prolonged. It wasn’t pretty.

Tim couldn’t help but think back to Jesse’s nervous talking as her mom was rushed into the back of an ambulance when Tim was waiting for them to be ready to take her too. It wasn’t the same, but Jesse’s friend Dumpster seemed to check too many mysterious illness boxes for it to not be considered. It would even explain the weird pain tolerance the kid seemed to have, though it was easy to conclude that Dumpster must not have come from the best home

in the first place given all the other information present (which wasn't a lot, but the content was disturbing regardless of that fact).

"I think we're dealing with a very, very sick kid," Tim said sadly.

# It looks a lot like trust and pity, but generosity still isn't the feeling of home, and heartbreak is just bitter nostalgia

Chapter Notes

> My laptop, as it turns out, can't be fixed. I either have to use an external keyboard in order to type correctly (but very awkwardly) or buy a whole other laptop. Everything's okay for the moment though. We shall persevere.

Seeing people on the edge of rooftops in Bludhaven only ever met one thing, and that was that they were going to jump off.

Dick had been on his way to a safe house at the end of a long night when a scream caught his attention, and he watched this scruffy kid in black clambering up onto a rooftop, disappear for a moment, and then throw his top half back over the guard.

He moved to the shadows of the roof nearby, away from the kid's line of sight, so he wouldn't freak out and fall over at the sight of a vigilante in the distance. Nightwing silently swung past two rooftops to get to the one the kid was on, and landed in a perfectly silent crouch.

"Hey, kid. You wanna get away from that ledge?" He asked in a gentle voice.

He hates the sight of the kid's head whipping around in a panic. It tugs at his heart.

From the black hood, Dick can see messy black hair, and icy blue eyes that are wide with fear seem to pierce through whatever's left of his heart.

Because for a moment, just one heartbeat, all he sees is Jason staring at him, scared out of his mind and vulnerable.

But Jason’s not fifteen. Hadn’t been fifteen in years.

Jason died.

Jason came back.

Jason’s not scared of him.

Jason hates him.

Dick took a slow breath in as the teen looked at him.

“I’m just sitting here. I’m not going to jump,” They frowned.

Dick nodded, “Alright, mind if I come closer, then? I won’t grab you unless you try to jump, but at least we can talk without being a roof away. How’s that sound?”

“Uh, sure?” The kid shrugged in response and waved him over with a hand, “So, uh, Nightwing, right?”

“That’s me,” He smirked a little as he crossed the rooftop and rested arms on the guard wall.

He let the silence sit for a moment before he glanced over. The teen looked back at him, and Dick realized he was looking at a very different familiar face. One they'd been looking for, and, in Tim’s case, losing sleep over.

“Wait a second… You’re Dumpster,” Nightwing frowned.

“Well, damn,” Dumpster snorted, “You don’t have to look so down about it.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m over the moon to see you after I couldn’t find you,” Nightwing explained quickly. He reached out and carefully squeezed the teen’s shoulder as if he was going to disappear again, “But you got shot, and I’ve been convinced we were going to find you dead in an alley, or read that police report if they found you first.”

“Oh. Yeah, no, I’m fine,” Dumpster shrugged, “It’s whatever. Welcome to Gotham.”

“It’s very much not ‘whatever,’ kid,” Nightwing protested, “You took at least two shots to the side and carried a lady for over half a dozen city blocks in a fireman’s carry. That does a lot of damage.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” He rolled his eyes, tugging his hood down to ruffle his knotted hair, “I’m well aware that I made everything ten times worse.”

“Did you go to a clinic?” Nightwing asked as he carefully grabbed one of his hands, and flipped it to check his palms. Everything was long scabbed over and well on into the final stages of healing, if not healed already. The teen must have been careful to have not picked at the scabs until the final stages of healing. It was hard to tell, but they looked ready to flake off, but almost like they hadn’t had the opportunity.

“Nope, just took them out myself,” Danny said in a sarcastic, awkward tone as he looked at the vigilante examining his hand. He was kind of jealous. Nightwing was fucking ripped. Danny just looked hilariously scrawny despite being able to chuck a bus.

It was a little weird, though. He seemed… actually worried. Even though the domino mask hid his eyes, and Nightwing’s long-ish hair kind of hid his expression a little, Danny could see the worry lines.

No one but Sam, Tucker, and Jazz worried about him. It was a little unsettling.

“You got a name, kid?”

Danny blinked, scrunching his face up as he refocused. Nightwing was looking directly at him again, not his hands, “It’s Tommy.”

“Tommy,” Nightwing nodded. It was a little concerning to watch the kid he knew was severely injured space out like that, “Would you let me check out your wounds?”

“Ugh, I’d really rather not, actually. They’re fine,” Tommy denied.

“I get that, but would you consider at least letting me introduce you to a friend of mine? You could clean up and make sure that there's nothing in your wound.” The vigilante amended, “He’s a nice guy. I’m sure he’d let you crash at his place for the night.”

Tommy scoffed and looked back out to the Bludhaven skyline, “Yeah, no. Thanks, but no. That sounds like an amazing way to screw myself over.”

“What are you worried about?”

“You’re seriously going to ask me that?” Tommy turned, staring at him with disbelief, “You’re a vigilante, probably a very experienced one, and you’re asking me what I’m worried about? Sure dude, I can spell it out for you,” Tommy snorted.

“Yeah, fair enough,” Nightwing hummed, thinking that it was a shame that this kid probably couldn’t be convinced to get to know his civilian self.

“Tell you what, Tommy: I really want to look at your injury, or at least get cleaned up so you’re less likely to develop sepsis or something. Why don’t you come with me to a safe house?” He offered, holding up a hand as Tommy opened his mouth to protest, “Just you and me. I can get you some spare clothes so you can clean the ones you’ve got, and you can help yourself to the medical supplies while I go get take out for us if you really don’t want me poking at it.”

Tommy frowned, But the furrowed brows on his face told Dick that Tommy might actually consider accepting it, if only to appease the vigilante.

“And you’ll let me leave after?” Tommy asked suspiciously.

“Well, it’s come wash your clothes, change bandages, and eat in a safe house or I walk you into a twenty four hour pharmacy and patch you up on top of Bat Burger.”

“I’d prefer that, actually,” Tommy grumbled.

“I’m not surprised to hear that, actually, considering you disappeared on me last time,” Nightwing smiled and gestured to his body playfully, “Buuuut if I try to stop you from leaving, you can get a free shot on your way out the door. Cross my heart! And the roof of a Bat Burger won't have a sink to flush your wound if you have to clean it.”

Nightwing saw a muscle in Tommy’s shoulder’s untense.

“Fine, but when the sun’s out, I leave, and you let me go.”

“Deal.”

Nightwing smirked. He straightened his arms on the edge of the railing and pushed up into a handstand. He carefully flipped forwards and dropped so he was sitting next to Tommy on the ledge. Dick moved his arm across the teen’s back as he pulled his grapple from his belt, “You ready?”

“If you make my side rip apart because of this, I’ll find a way to dye your suit white,” Tommy grumbled, reluctantly reaching from under Nightwing’s arm and wrapping his arms around on top of his opposite shoulder to give himself as much security as he could.

Dick could almost pretend it was Jason, and that he'd been gifted a second chance.

"I could pull it off, but I acknowledge and appreciate your threat."

He tucked himself into Nightwing's side and missed the flash of heartbreak across his face as the vigilante fired his grapple, and they both went soaring through the Bludhaven sky.

Danny had to grit his teeth as Nightwing flung them through the air from high-rise to high-rise, and the force of the swung tugged at his side. He refused to make a sound, but he had a feeling that Nightwing had picked up on his pain anyway judging by the frown on his face. And the concerned glances down that Tommy was pointedly ignoring, not that ignoring it made a difference.

He could've just broken into a gym and cleaned up. He was still covered in sewage from his three-day stint in the sewers of Gotham, and the ashen chaos of Crime Valley and the blood.

He could have. He should have.

But this would be a one-stop shop, and if he had to, he could run. If he ran, he couldn't stay anywhere a Bat might find him, but he could run.

*Could he outrun a Bat if he barely survived outrunning his past?*

Even if it was too good to be true, even if it went bad, it couldn't be worse than his dad shunting the house into a different dimension when he was eight as his mom's birthday present. That had been horrifying. No, this was something he could handle.

Nightwing swung and clipped the grapple back to his belt as they freely soared through the air. He quickly scooped Tommy's legs up so the impact on the roof wouldn't hurt him, but gently set him down after.

“Sorry about aggravating your side,” Nightwing said softly as he led Tommy to the door to the stairwell, and down into the dimly lit space.

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not,” Dick shot back as they went down two floors.

“Fine, then. Let me rephrase it; it couldn’t be helped,” The teen sassed from behind him.

Dick couldn’t help but smile at the sass as they left the stairwell and entered into one of the first apartments.

Tommy followed along quietly and scoped out the place from the doorway in case he had to escape from the place (not that it would be hard, but it was more-so to look for places he could cram himself into and then go intangible and invisible where he wouldn’t be seen).

It was… messy.

Now, Danny’s never had a safe house, but it felt way more like a bachelor pad than a safe house. There was a half eaten box of cereal open on the coffee table. No dishes in the sink, but Danny could bet they hadn’t been unloaded from the dishwasher. There were some clothes tossed around. It felt way closer to a home than a safe house.

The smirk on Nightwing’s face told him that either he was enjoying Danny’s confusion, or that the entire setup was intentional. Probably both.

Nightwing patted the kid’s shoulder and pointed to a door, “That’s the bathroom, bud. If you close the door, I won’t look at your side or anything. The first aid kit’s under the sink. Can’t miss it.”

Tommy nodded, and awkwardly took his shoes off. He shuffled across the apartment and into the bathroom. When the door shut behind the lanky teen, Nightwing let loose a heavy sigh and moved into the bedroom of his favourite safe house.

Was it stupid to bring Tommy here? Maybe, but the kid deserved one night, just one, where he wasn't trying to heal on the streets.

Dick dug through his dresser, pulling out an old Batman hoodie that he'd gotten when it had just been him and Damian. It was the smallest sweater in the safe house. Dick knew Tommy would practically be swimming in it, but it would be warm.

He grabbed a pair of old sweats and quickly moved across the hall. He knocked on the door before opening it a little and setting the clothes on the floor.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome, bud. There's industrial stain remover in the corner between the washer and dryer."

"For what?" Tommy asked as he cracked open the first aid kit and carefully reached down for the clothes.

"The bloodstains," Dick pointed out gently, "You want anything special to eat? Any restrictions?"

Danny blinked and stared at the door. He swallowed and shook his head at the door, "N-no, uh, thanks. Anything's fine. You really don't have to…"

Nightwing smiled on the other side of the door, "I know. I'll be back in ten, Tommy. You stay put," He teased. He moved away from the bathroom and left the apartment, making sure the apartment door was locked on the way out. Nightwing couldn't help but wonder how he ended up in Blud as he flew across the rooftops.

Danny sighed when he heard the vigilante leave. He set the clothes on the sink and started to pull off his clothes one layer at a time. He put them straight into the washer after making sure the pockets were all empty and dumped a good amount of the stain remover into the machine along with detergent. He pulled the few pairs of spare clothes from his bag and dumped them in the wash too before he started the machine.

“If a vigilante is vouching for you, you better work on those stupid blood stains,” Danny grumbled, “I miss the detergent at home.”

Danny looked down at the old wrapping and scrunched his nose, “Gross. Okay, you’re a little… overdue.”

He sighed and scratched his head as he debated with himself about stealing a shower or just dressing. Standing in a hero’s bathroom naked was fucking awkward.

“Screw it,” Danny grunted, cutting his bandages loose, and carefully peeling them away to see his side. It barely looked like Wulf had ripped into him.

So, progress.

Danny shoved the old bandages into his backpack’s first aid kit and carefully moved into the shower. He ignored his surroundings as best as he could as he flushed the wound itself.

He didn’t remember sliding down the wall of the shower, but he must have considering he was sitting at the bottom. He took a shaky breath as he iced over the injury. Danny turned the shower on before he could change his mind, and borrowed some of Nightwing’s soap. The guy was nice. He probably wouldn’t mind. Danny didn’t linger, but he wanted to. He just

waited until the water ran clean before he hopped out and pulled on the pants that Nightwing left him.

He carefully replaced everything with clean bandages after getting rid of the ice. Danny pulled on the Batman sweater, praying that the sweater would be as close as he ever got to the man as he made sure everything, including his purse, was shoved back in his backpack.

He awkwardly shuffled out of the bathroom and down the short hallway. He ignored the mess of the living room and sat down on the apparently well-loved couch, judging by the wear and tear. Nightwing hadn't returned yet.

Danny pulled out his phone to see if there were any available wifi signals available. There were, and judging from the probably-very-sketchy options he was presented with, he'd probably mess up someone's spyware by pinging an extra-dimensional signal, but at that point Danny would call it community service.

He tapped on the wifi with the worst signal and waited as the screen on his phone loaded up their server.

Success. Danny smiled and quietly messaged his best friends.

**Danny:** So, it's been a little crazy over here. I may have gotten shot a couple times

**Danny:** I'm fine, but there's been some… developments…

**Danny:** I'll explain later

**Sam:** Danny, what the fuck?

**Jazz:** Danny Fenton! You will explain now, young man!

**Danny:** Uh

**Sam:** By the way, Jazz is sleeping over at my house to get away from your psycho parents.

**Sam:** Surprise.

**Danny:** Love you Jazz gotta go

**Tucker:** Danny: gets shot

**Tucker:** Also Danny: talk soon <3

Danny typed quickly, turning off his phone completely and shoving it into his backpack with wide eyes.

“Welp. I’m dead.”

“Not on my watch, buddy,” Nightwing laughed as he opened the window with his foot and slid into the apartment, arms full of Bat Burger bags, “You can’t make me eat all this on my own.”

Danny watched the vigilante contort his way through the window with a vague sense of horror, “That’s… impressive.”

“Why, thank you,” Dick smirked, walking over to the coffee table. He set everything down and ruffled the teen’s wet hair as he passed by to go put on some civies. He refused to acknowledge that Tommy actually showered, but he was soooo counting it as a win.

“Dig in, I’ll be right back.”

He swapped his gear out for sweats and a muscle shirt that was at the top of the drawer. He happily resigned himself to maybe-sort of-suicide watch and moved back to the living room. Besides, Tommy wasn’t a bad kid. Dick was a good judge of character, he would know.

The fact that Damian still tried to stab people didn’t count. It was his love language.

He plopped down on the couch and turned the tv on to whatever early morning cartoon would be on at four in the morning (that is to say, very obscure ones).

“How’s your wounds?” Dick asked. He glanced over at Tommy who’d been munching on fries.

Tommy shrugged and shoved a small handful of fries into his mouth, “They’re fine. They're healing. Believe me, it’s a lot better than the first day. That sucked.”

“Oh yeah?” Dick asked, trying to sound like he wasn’t being nosy. He was. He absolutely was.

Tommy gave him a look, “If you want the gruesome play by play, sorry to say, you aren’t getting it.”

“I’m just curious, Tommy,” Nightwing said softly, “You don’t have to tell me everything, but if you want to, I’ll listen.”

“I shoved my hand in my stomach to get three bullets out, but don’t worry, I totally used gloves.” Tommy deadpanned.

“Alright, alright. I can tell when my concern’s not wanted,” Dick teased.

He leaned back into the couch and took a bite of the burger. He left the teenager next to him alone for a little while, and was rewarded with the kid slowly relaxing into the couch cushions. He didn't seem to be half asleep, though. He looked to be just relaxing.

Dick felt a little bad for wanting to pretend it was Jason, or even Tim, the two siblings he hurt the most.

Meanwhile Tommy was sort of freaking out about sitting next to Nightwing in casual clothes. It wasn’t… too weird because Danny knew they weren’t heroes all the time, but at the same time… What? Who would just… un-suit to hang out with a random teenager? Nightwing, apparently.

He grabbed the burger that Nightwing slid across to him.

“Thanks,” Danny said as he looked over to the vigilante. He paused as he registered what was on the muscle shirt for the first time, and by the growing smugness coming from Nightwing, Danny figured the *What the fuck am I looking at?* expression showed very clearly on his face.

It was a stupid novelty muscle shirt. Danny had no idea why he was surprised when he was currently borrowing a Batman sweater, but he wasn’t ready to see Nightwing in one of those shitty shirts that said “I’m not saying I’m Batman. I’m just saying nobody has ever seen me and Batman in a room together.”

“That’s… ironically untrue,” Danny snorted, “Immaculate vibes, right there. You should put it on top of your gear to fight crime.”

“I should. I really should,” Nightwing snickered, “Batman would hate that.”

“That’s exactly why you should do it,” Danny explained as he unwrapped the burger, “Listen, sometimes you’ve just gotta harmlessly mess with your… uh… partner? Parental figure? I don’t know, whatever you and Batman are.”

“What kind of things did you do to mess with your parents?” Nightwing asked slyly.

Danny shrugged as he racked his brain for information harmless enough that he could spill. Whether or not Nightwing thought he was being serious was another matter entirely.

“Got them to think I was in a gang once,” He responded casually, “They were pissed.”

“Were you…?” *Hurt when they were angry with you?*

“I’ve never been in a gang before. Don’t plan on it either.”

After not eating for days, Danny crushed two of the burgers, an order and a half of fries, and claimed one of the drinks as his own. Nightwing seemed all too happy about that, so he figured it was fine. He let himself curl into the couch and watch the show for a while. He didn't realize how relaxed Nightwing was on the other side of the couch until the vigilante was watching him get up with tense shoulders.

“My clothes,” Danny murmured.

Nightwing nodded and sat back on the couch.

Danny swapped them from the washer to the dryer, noted how long the cycle would take, and moved back to the couch. Danny loved cartoons, and even though he had to watch them under the watchful eye of a Bat, it was nice to be able to enjoy them.

“So, you sure you’re not okay with letting me check your abdomen?” Nightwing asked during a commercial.

It was a single moment. Nightwing would’ve missed it if he hadn’t been trained by Bruce. If Damian’s main way of expressing himself wasn’t micro-expressions in the moments between seconds. If Jason hadn’t come back pissed at life itself with a hairpin trigger.

Tommy turned with a snap, with an apparent anger that Dick hadn’t known was there. It was a spasm in his neck and shoulders. A twitch near his inner eye. Then it was gone, and Tommy looked over to him with a smooth, blended motion and sighed with the same tired, playfully sassy expression he’d had all night.

It would have looked fully seamless if Dick was anyone else other than a Bat.

Danny pulled the borrowed sweater up to show the bandages.

“Look. It’s all secure and shit. It’s fine. I’m fine,” Danny sighed, dropping the hem of the worn sweater.

Nightwing watched as Tommy turned back to the show with a dull, disinterested stare, more annoyed at Nightwing asking then any potential anger.

It was years of intense training that kept Dick’s neutral expression firmly in place as he turned back to the television.

When Tommy got up and went to the bathroom again, this time with his backpack, he thought nothing of it. The kid came back and curled back up on the couch with his head resting on the arm. Within twenty minutes, he seemed to pass out, and the little snores from the way he was positioned on the couch confirmed it. He let himself relax.

Tommy was gone the next time he opened his eyes.

# The joys of sibling bonding and agreeing to postpone mutually assured destruction to team up against your sibling's terrible tastes

Chapter Notes

> I have no idea if I'm going to have enough soul in my body come Wednesday to post anything due to work reasons, so have this just in case. If nothing comes on Wednesday, you know it's because you got an extra extra early chapter and have a longer wait until the next one. Sorry!

The next day, Dick found himself over at the manor for a nice brunch with Alfie. He even managed to convince Tim to come up and join them to get out of the cave for a while. Did Dick feel a little bad when Damian snapped and tried strangling Tim with a dish towel? A little, but Tim needed a different kind of excitement instead of fixating on a no-longer-missing teen.

Besides, Dick was pretty sure sibling violence was the only way Damian knew how to express connection, and was pretty sure he only got to skip that stage out of respect for the Robin and Batman mantles.

“You know, I don’t know why you bother trying to kill him?” Stephanie called out from where she was laying upside down on the couch with a controller in her hands. She focused on the screen behind where Damian was perched on Tim's back with a blue and white gingham dish towel wrapped around the genius’ neck.

“Attempted murder is such a boring hobby,” Tim wheezed with his hands gripping the wet cloth to keep it from crushing his windpipe, “You should try being successful at murder.”

Tim wiggled his fingers under the cloth. He ignored the way he had to scratch his throat, and flung the cloth up and over his head with the new-found leverage.

“If you murder my best friend, I’m dragging you to the concert instead of him, you little brat,” Steph informed with a smug little smile as she angled her head to see past the boys in front of the TV.

Tim wished Damian would be the kind of sibling to just take the fall, but the little gremlin pushed off of his back as soon as the cloth left the genius’ fingers. The sound of two feet barely touching the ground was the only hint the demon had landed.

“I changed my mind. Damian, go ahead and kill me. I’m not much of a fan of Steph’s current phase of music,” Tim deadpanned, glancing over his shoulder at cold emerald eyes with his own lifeless gray-blue ones.

“You assume my bloodlust overshadows my self-preservation, Drake. You are not the only one to despise Brown’s so-called music tastes,” Damian sneered.

Tim pouted at the Robin, “You suck. I’ll see if the venue is wheelchair accessible. I’m sure Barbara wouldn’t say no to a girls night. I’m surprised the show didn’t get outright canceled, actually.”

Stephanie rolled her eyes as she rolled over onto her stomach, “You act like it’s the worst music in the world. It’s very melodic and emotional, and you’re the ones with no taste. Besides, she’s a punk. I doubt she’s worried that someone’s going to fuck up her venue.”

“She chants her own name like you are going to forget you are there to hear her sing her own despicable music,” Damian scowled.

“I’m going to have to agree with Damian,” Tim ignored the glare stabbing into him from the nightmare in human skin standing next to him, “If I wanted to listen to that, I would have sleepovers at Dick’s apartment and compliment him until his ego’s too big to be expressed in words, and instead is expressed through singing himself praises in the shower.”

“I would resent that, but to do so I would have to be ashamed of the fact that I’m okay relishing in my self-worth every once and awhile,” Dick smirked, leaning over the back of the parlour’s sofa dramatically with a hand on his forehead.

He relished in the snickers that came from Stephanie, and slid out of the room. He could hear the rising debate of who would most appreciate the concert: Duke, who might get a kick out of the whack light trails of the venue goers, or Barbara, who could probably use a night out with the girls. Cass was already going to be going with Steph, so all that was left was to officially decide who got ticket number three.

**Danny:** I got shot, but I'm okay. I got caught in the crossfire of that damn gang war.

**Danny:** I can only assume Clockwork wanted to mess with me afterwards because I was not prepared for him to appear and go "hey you're the king, congratulations, come get the last bits of life scared out of you and heal in the Ghost Zone"

**Sam:** I stand by the fact that he is the oldest little shit in existence.

**Tucker:** Clockwork is my god, honestly.

**Tucker:** If he gives me extra seconds to hold my world records on my games, then that is between me and god.

**Danny:** I'd call it cheating if Clockwork didn't owe you for keeping me sane.

**Tucker:** And killing us in Dan's timeline, but who's keeping track of how much he owes me in back-favours.

**Sam:** There's literally no way to prove it's Clockwork. He just keeps swinging between inflating his own ego and screaming "Shout out to ya, Clocky!"

**Tucker:** It's a team effort between me and my god, shut up.

**Sam:** It's really not.

**Danny:** "Clocky"

**Danny:** Next time I see him, oh man, it's game over for him

Dick made a bit of a show of hiding from the bickering siblings before they remembered they hadn't included him in the sacrificial concert-goer debate, and made his way down to the cave where his only company were the bats, a dinosaur, and a giant fucking penny.

The file was still pulled up in the background of the massive supercomputer.

***Name:*** *Unknown*

***Aliases:*** *Dumpster*

***Age:*** *Mid to late teens*

***Appearance:*** *Caucasian, Black hair, Blue eyes, 5'6*

***Condition:*** *Possible malnourishment. Multiple wounds to his left side, suspected gunshots, no way to confirm. Burnt hands, first degree, possible second. Possible serious unknown illness (If hospitalized, establishment should be informed to isolate as a precaution)*

***History:*** *Unknown.*

***Status:*** *Unknown: see mission report for the Crime Alley Flaming Turf War (May 29 - June 1)*

Dick let himself sit in Bruce's chair. He could practically feel the imprint of Tim in the chair.

"He's almost worse than Bruce, except he's way more tolerable when he's obsessed with something."

He let out a sigh and began updating the information in the file to close it. Mystery solved. The kid was alive.

***Name:*** *Tommy (Last name unknown)*

***Aliases:*** *Dumpster*

***Age:*** *Mid teens, possibly younger*

***Appearance:*** *Caucasian, Messy and knotted black hair, Blue eyes, 5'6, Very pale, Thin build*

***Condition:*** *Definite malnourishment. Exhaustion is physically evident. Possible serious unknown illness (If hospitalized, establishment should be informed to isolate as a precaution). Multiple gunshot wounds to the left side of abdomen. Tommy claims to have removed three bullets with his hands (removal timeframe unknown).Tommy denies receiving any medical assistance for his recent injuries. Burns on his hands have healed with only scabs that are ready to peel being left. Concerning scarring on his abdomen not likely linked to medical procedures or recent incident including scarring heavily resembling severe Lichtenberg (however, whether it is or is not Lichtenberg scarring is unknown, and could not be confirmed). High pain tolerance is likely due to incidents relating to possible Lichtenberg scarring.*

***History:*** *Homeless, likely a runaway who wasn't safe at home. Possible abuse, but not confirmed. Discussion with Tommy hints at being potentially unsafe with his parents. Old and new scars are evident on Tommy's torso, including potential electrical scarring as seen when displaying the new dressing on his bullet wounds. Tommy also has a concerning pain tolerance as evident by how little he expressed pain radiating from his side despite claims of knowing his actions of carrying Heidi McMillain made things "Ten times worse" for him. Based on confirmation of Tommy's homelessness and being referred to as "Dumpster", it can be assumed that there may be a hostile social environment from within the homeless communities of the Alley to the point where Alley kids also refer to him as "Dumpster." This would in part explain the Tommy's suspected suicidal behaviour and journey to Bludhaven from Crime Alley. It is noteworthy to highlight how Tommy denied being on the roof of a building with the intention to jump, but there was no way to confirm or deny intentions.*

***Status:*** *Missing, Alive: see mission report for the Crime Alley Flaming Turf War (May 29 - June 1)*

Dick should save it. The kid was connected directly to a suspicious event. It was protocol.

Well over ten minutes had passed since he had written the update for the file on Tommy. All he had to do was save it.

He just had to save the update.

"It's not a big deal," Dick murmured even as he moved his hand to erase the update, "There's been bigger updates on people more important."

The memory of Tommy snoring against the arm of Dick's second comfiest couch, and the way the couch was still long after Tommy was gone itched in his mind.

How did Tommy leave? Dick would have noticed, should have noticed, or was he too busy thinking about how he wanted it to be Jason who was snoring on the couch after staying up all night to watch cartoons with Dick.

Nightwing was almost certain that Tommy hadn't meant to reveal the thick, fractal scarring that crawled beneath the edges of the wrap and the shadowed cover of the borrowed hero sweater. He might not have seen the horrifying trails in the dim light of the safe house if the comforting light of the cartoons hadn't contrasted against the weird colouration of the damaged tissue.

He had a good feeling that sharing what he knew would destroy any trust Tommy had in Nightwing, and that was far more important.

Dick deleted his report and the update on Tommy as Tim dragged his feet down the steps of the Cave's entrance, and decided it was better this way.

Dick unclenched his hands and leaned back into the chair as Tim exited the staircase with a snicker.

"Hey, that's my spot."

"I know. It's hard not to notice how my ass doesn't align with your ass grooves," Dick snorted. Tim smiled and strolled over the platform to the eldest Robin.

It was no surprise to Tim to see Dumpster's file open where he'd left it in the one area of the screen where it had stayed opened the past couple of weeks even through investigating gang members.

Tim looked over at Dick, ripping his eyes from the file, "I'm worried about this Dumpster kid."

Dick debated with himself for a minute. He stared at the original document that lacked the changes Dick knew he should have kept.

“His name’s Tommy,” Dick sighed. He rolled his head along the back of the chair to look at Tim, “He’s alive. Ran into him last night and wanted to take another look at what we knew. You’ve been hogging the computer.”

Tim absorbed the information with a nod, and reached over, quickly updating Dumpster’s name on file, “Well, now you don’t have to call him Dumpster.”

“I tried not to call him that anyways, but you aren’t wrong. Tommy’s a better name.”

“Fair, but Tommy Dumpster is the perfect street name. It’s hilarious, and vaguely threatening.”

“I’ve read your report, Timmy.”

“Listen,” Tim hummed, swinging his head dramatically to look at Dick, “Just because I’m reasonably sure that the Dumpster nickname is an insult towards Tommy does not mean I don’t also like it. You use Dumpster as his name for two weeks and see how much you get used to it. Dumpster feels so normal that Tommy’s the name that feels weird.”

“It’s okay to be worried for him, Tim,” Dick said seriously, brushing aside Tim’s deflection.

Tim paused. He leaned against the desk and clenched his hands, “I… Dick, this kid, I’m really worried about him. I’m pretty sure he’s sick.”

Dick’s expression softened as he listened to his little brother, “Yeah, I saw that little tidbit about hospital isolation in your report, but it might not be him.”

“Fine, then. *Someone* out there seems to have blood that decays to the point where it’s not blood, and I can’t explain it. Bruce can’t explain it. I even called in a favour from Barry, and he can’t explain it, either. The way it was mixed in with the blood and decomposed in the first sample… It…I don’t,” Tim cut himself off and took a breath.

Dick watched Tim wrestle with the logistics of a problem he wanted to solve but didn’t know quite how to, “I’m sure it’ll be okay, Tim.”

“The closest we can come to would be if someone bleached the blood away… but whatever was in the blood was mixed in, Dick? It’s not the same, but imagine if someone had acid in their veins, destroying them from the inside constantly. It’s the only thing that makes sense, and I don’t want it to make sense!” Tim exclaimed through gritted teeth.

Dick placed a gentle hand on Tim’s back as he stood up. He rubbed his brother’s back as he thought over the hours he spent with Tommy.

“Maybe we don’t know the whole story here. There could be something else in play, y’know. It happens a lot.”

“Or there could be a sick kid out there on the streets waiting to die, or, worse, not knowing anything’s wrong!”

Dick gave a nod of consideration, “Then maybe we should make contact?”

“... I’ll keep an eye out, for sure.”

Dick couldn’t even blink before Tim’s torn expression softened into contemplation as Tim brainstormed potential encounters. Dick would be a liar if he said Tim’s “I’m definitely planning something, or maybe several somethings in case the first something doesn’t pan out” expression didn’t warm his heart with a sad ache.

**Danny:** So, the other thing

**Danny:** Remember when the whole Pariah Dark thing happened?

**Tucker:** That time when we were collectively sucked into the Ghost Zone and it was space-time nightmare filled with the looming threat of becoming undone due to the destabilization of parallel dimensions?

**Tucker:** That thing?

**Tucker:** Unfortunately.

**Sam:** Where are you going with this?

**Danny:** And I defeated him

**Sam:** Hard to forget, but go off.

**Danny:** In what could be considered single combat

**Tucker:** No.

**Tucker:** Danny please.

**Tucker:** Don't even say it.

**Danny:** And we kept joking

**Tucker:** No.

**Danny:** That I'd become king of the Ghost Zone someday?

**Tucker:** God damn it, Danny.

**Jazz:** …Am I a Princess or a Lady of the Ghost Zone?

**Danny:** You decide. I'm trying not to die over here.

**Sam:** You're about two years too late.

# Train pains and light problems make for interesting conversations in the face of prejudice and also convenient reasons for stealing the comfiest bed in the house due to it having blackout curtains

Danny smacked a button on a crosswalk and patiently waited with the quickly growing miserable morning crowd. He passed a little hole in the wall restaurant that told Danny two things: This restaurant apparently had the best Efo Riro in town, that the town was Bludhaven.

Danny didn't even try to remember where Nightwing's maybe-safehouse on his way through the smoggy streets. Why bother, really. The heroes were part of the crowd he was running from, but he wasn't about to act like he was a crime against existence.

Instead, he figured vanishing as promised was a good compromise.

It was almost soothing to just blend in and wander with zero purpose again. He wasn't familiar with the grungy streets of Bludhaven enough to actually care about a destination. It was just him and the reliable weight of his backpack and Sam's purse sandwiched between them as his company through the populated sidewalks.

*He and dad picked out the glowy stars to put on the ceiling above his bed after the first camping trip Danny could remember. He stayed up all night learning constellations. Apparently, they were also good for a three-dimensional spatial map for ripping through planes of existence. Still, the memory of the glow in the dark plastic stars stuck to his ceiling was… pleasant. And sad.*

The chill air of the nearest harbor worked its way through the cracked and worn streets but didn't make him shiver like it did the older man next to him. As far as he was concerned, it was still sweater weather.

*Jazz taking him to a playground when he was little and pushing him on the swings until the sun went down, just them. Jazz always bundling Danny up in too many layers, but by the end of playing he wouldn't be complaining about having to wear them. Mom and dad, locked in*

*their labs, too concerned with themselves to play outside on something unproductive. Jazz and Danny going back to the playground after Danny learned she knew about him and letting themselves be regular kids under the cover of twilight until a ghost would disrupt them.*

Another gust of wet wind burst through the streets as Danny stepped up onto the curb and continued moving forwards.

An old, rusty gray car splashed disgusting street water onto the stretch of concrete in front of him. It stained some lady's pristine white coat. Danny felt a little bad, but there wasn't anything he could do about it, really.

He kept walking through the winding streets of Bludhaven until a bridge grew into Danny's field of view and his feet stepped onto the floating concrete.

Months before, back when he'd arrived in Gotham, he hadn't known there would be as many bridges as there were. Danny couldn't figure out how he hadn't made the connection, but as someone who'd long since fallen in love with flying, he appreciated just how high up the bridges were, and what the feeling of leaning over felt like.

How easy it would be to tilt himself over the railing. To phase through. To fly away, regardless of being in plain view or not. But he didn't. Couldn't.

All because more than just the view would take his breath away and stun him into silence. Danny couldn't stop the snort of amusement at the GIW letting Danny watch the sunrise one last time before dragging him off to some lap beneath a mountain in a forgotten government bunker or something. They didn't give a fuck about what he wanted or his wellbeing. Nor did his parents.

*Maddie leaning out of the window of the GAV, bracing herself against the console and the window as she hefted the hulking weapon and aimed through her orange goggles, catching her son's eyes through the scope. Her teeth looked like they were grinding in her state of disgust, but the hatred in her eyes hurt the most.*

Vlad might, and Danny refused to dwell on that conclusion. Danny couldn’t stop himself from wondering if Vlad knew whether he was still alive or not.

It wouldn’t make much difference either way.

*They hated him despite how much he loved them.*

He disappeared into the dirty Gotham underworld once again, leaving the sun behind him in the hazy sky above in favour of the decrepit anonymity of being a shitty homeless teen in the eyes of anyone he came across.

Danny paid no mind as he joined the early morning crowd at the nearest subway station. He slid his fare into the slot on the stupid machine and retrieved his ticket on the other side, and he pointedly ignored the glares of the subway security guards.

They'd seen hundreds of Danny before. As far as they were concerned, he wasn't special. Homelessness wasn’t unique.

Danny did his best to pay no mind to them as he passed through. He could tell they wanted to stop him. The one man had tried to move towards him, only to be stopped by what Danny could safely assume was either a summer student or a student worker in general.

He didn’t notice the chill or frost he’d left behind on the metal of the ticket taker, but there was a shudder from the person behind him as they collected their own ticket only to have the cold sink into their skin. Danny only noticed the irrational flare in his chest as he caught the gaze of the guard in his late thirties and hoped for the man to pick a fight with Danny.

The younger worker had a hand on the man’s shoulder, quietly whispering to leave him alone, that he had paid and had the right to ride. Danny stared at him coldly. He could hear

the man make remarks across the platform about how he was just going to ride the subway all day and never get off just to sleep on the bench.

The feeling in his chest itched as Danny zeroed in on the man. The guard gave a snarl that was all teeth and disdain.

Danny did nothing. Danny gave the man no reaction outside of his cold, absent stare. No angry glare. Definitely no smile.

He just walked along until he had to break eye contact, and quietly boarded the 9:30 line bound for Robinson Square and sat in a far corner. He leaned against the wall and politely freed up as much space as he could for the masses to occupy. Danny could see the moment the tail end of the crowd realized that the only bench or free spots to stand were in Danny's immediate vicinity. The passengers that had boarded Danny and who had seen security's reaction to him, complete with the seething and gesturing at the homeless teen, were pretending Danny didn't exist, were already situated and happily pretending Danny didn't exist.

Of course, to Danny's surprised expectation, the passengers boarding behind had picked up on the behaviour of the other passengers and were quickly beginning to mimic them even as they were forced to come closer and closer to Danny. The spot on the bench immediately next to the halfa stayed empty even as the space in front of him filled with what Danny supposed with some university students. There was a Gotham U keychain clipped to the shoulder bag of the girl in front of him. She caught his eyes and glared.

"Touch me or my bag and you're dead."

"Don't worry, I'd rather not," Danny said with a grumble. He winced, "Wait, that sounded gross. I meant that I wouldn't do anything. Sorry about that."

"Fuck off, you disgusting piece of shit," She glared, raising her hand in a motion that told Danny if he kept sitting straight on the bench, he'd find himself getting smacked or punched.

Danny shrunk into the bench and turned away as much as he could. He caught the reflection of his teal eyes in the window behind him and watched as the iced over blue they always were attempting to fleck green.

“Easy lady, some people just want to get from point a to point b in peace,” Said a young man as he took the last available spot on the bench, right next to Danny.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it,” Danny defended, glancing over to the guy who sat down. He couldn’t help the irrational unease that this guy would also end up targeting him to vent some anger this morning.

The guy was taller and broader than Danny, but that wasn’t hard. He smiled and held a hand between Danny and the girl, as if to catch her hand should she strike (which was a weird thought. No one had felt the need to physically defend Danny during his stay in Gotham). Soon enough, the hand that was held between them dropped when the woman began ignoring the two of them and was held out to Danny in offering instead.

Danny unsurely looked up at the guy as he took the dark, warm hand in his pale, icy grasp. His natural hair was buzzed short and faded at the sides. He was wearing glasses, but after years of hanging out with Tucker and playing video games whenever he wasn’t fighting ghosts, he recognized the glint of glasses that weren’t prescription, but rather for blue light.

“Woah, your hands are cold,” He chuckled, “I’m Duke, nice to meet you.”

“Tommy, and same. Uh, thanks, too. That was nice of you,” Danny said quietly, ignoring the pointedness of the girl putting on headphones. He shrugged at Duke,” And sorry about my hands. They’re just like that.”

“Damn dude, that’s gotta suck,” Duke sympathized.

“Well, I’m kinda stuck with them, so it doesn’t really bother me, just the people I shake hands with,” Danny said playfully.

*Danny passing out playing Doom with Tucker and Sam. They'd wake up at four in the morning thanks to the scream of whoever Danny shoved his feet against. They made him sleep with socks on after the first twenty times. They kept fuzzy socks over at each of their houses. Those were Danny's socks, and Danny's alone.*

"That's fair, honestly," Duke nodded, "where are you getting off at?"

"Oh, uh, Robinson, but, honestly? I might get off sooner if I'm just going to be forced to cram myself in a corner for everyone's comfort. At that point, I'd rather just get off. Make everyone's lives a little more tolerable," Danny shrugged.

The train shuddered as it left the station, and Danny watched as the brick tunnel outside the window blurred and streaked.

"I can't say I'd blame you for wanting to get off, but you have just as much right to ride the subway as anyone else does. I'm headed past Robinson, but I could get off with you if you'd like. My stop's the Fashion District Connection but taking a stroll through Robinson probably won't hurt. Ivy hasn't caused any trouble lately," Duke offered with a concerned frown, shooting a glance around the cart for the first time since he'd noticed those in the carriage were ostracizing the kid in the corner.

He was disappointed to find that people were trying and failing to pretend that they were ignoring everyone instead of just Tommy, but the person on the opposing bench was leaning away from where Tommy was sitting with their cell phone clutched just a bit too tightly, even for a Gothamite.

The university students in front of them went without saying.

There was a businessman who was looking over and scowling at Tommy, but not Duke.

A little closer to the middle of the carriage, Duke could catch the sight of "Alley trash" on the lips of passengers in the middle of a conversation. The meta was absolutely certain Tommy could hear the two older ladies a couple of seats away whisper about Tommy being, "A little far from the city dump, aren't we?"

Tucked away from the kid's eyes, Duke let himself clench his hand in his jeans. Tommy looked unbothered, but from the glance the teenager made to the ladies followed by curling up more towards the back of the bench to look out of the window, Duke knew that, on some level, Tommy was bothered by it.

Even if he wasn't…

Duke scowled at the older women.

"Don't bother, Duke. Just adds fuel to their fire," Tommy murmured despondently with his cheek against the window, "So… what are you going to do in the Fashion District?"

"I'm picking something up for a friend. Apparently, the company doesn't ship directly to houses, and I'm the one who's the closest to go get her things from the shipping company," Duke said, accepting the change in focus.

Danny nodded along, "Gotta love when friends make you do their bidding. Good luck with that, Duke. Be careful. You never know what'll hide in a bunch of boxes."

Duke shot Tommy a wary look, "Uh? Something I should know about?"

"No? It's Gotham. I'm not trying to be vague and ominous. I mean it," Danny corrected, dismissing thoughts of being harassed by Boxy, "You really don't know what happens behind closed doors, you know?"

"Oh, boy, do I ever understand that sentiment," Duke snorted as quiet fell over the both of them.

Duke was running on no sleep, having covered Tim's patrols in addition to his own day time patrols due to progress on a drug cartel he was staking out, and he'd been hoping to crash

hard and sleep until dinner, but Stephanie decided to ask him nicely to go get her stupid merch that had finally arrived at some niche shipping company. He'd gone longer without sleep, sure, but he'd forgotten about the stupid subway lights, and their love of straining his eyes.

Duke wasn't a fan of the harsh yet dim lights of the subway carriages. It always gave him a headache and messed with his abilities, and he could already feel the ache behind his eyes begin to claw at him.

The world always seemed too sharp under the strain. Too bright.

The kid sitting next to him was no different.

Tommy had his back to the wall. He'd turned away from the wall at some point to talk to Duke and had curled into the back of the seat with his pale face pressed against the window. He was so pale, Duke would've been convinced he was actually seeing something, but everything seemed to glow and shine.

But, then again, the kid wasn't just fuzzy with light, he was almost like starlight, but the light was weird. It definitely wasn't white like most stars.

The reflection of the window felt way brighter than it should be, even with his growing headache.

Maybe a meta?

It took the detective too long to realize the crystal blue eyes of the teen in front of him were looking into his own and not looking away.

But... *were* they blue?

Duke was staring.

“Shit, sorry, zoned out for a second.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s fine.”

True to Tommy’s word, he ended up getting off at the stop before the Robinson Square Terminal but told Duke not to bother walking him out.

“It’s fine. I got on, didn’t I? I’m a big boy,” Tommy grinned, “But thanks, Duke. You’re a good dude.”

Duke nodded and smiled. He watched Tommy get off, and the atmosphere of the carriage seemed to relax. The person clutching their cell phone was holding it loosely. The man who’d been scowling at Tommy chilled the fuck out. The older women weren’t hiding their disdain behind whispers and pointed tones. The meta was almost certain Tommy could hear every word because he glanced back over his shoulder.

Tommy didn’t say anything, though. He just disappeared into the crowd, and the light he gave off, brighter than those around him even as the strain made the lights stretch and warp, just disappeared with a blink of Duke’s eyes.

Like he was never even there.

Duke got off at his stop at the Fashion District Connection, found the little small business, picked up Stephanie’s package, and prepared to pay the outrageous taxi fare to take him from the Fashion District to Bristol without complaint.

He swallowed down his growing nausea and he sat in the back of a decently clean taxi, and texted Bruce.

**Duke:** Hey, Bruce, can I crash in your room?

**Bruce:** Sure you can. I'm in the office anyway, but I thought you'd gone to one of the safe houses?

**Duke:** I did, but Steph decided I was the closest person to pick up her shirts and sent me to get her merch from her latest band obsession. I made the mistake of taking the subway there, and my head is killing me.

**Bruce:** I'll ask Alfred if he can make sure my blackout curtains are drawn.

**Duke:** Thanks, Bruce.

Duke put his head against the window and cursed Gotham's rush hour.

Duke thanked the driver and paid the premium price for getting stuck in the morning rush, collected Stephanie's box, and walked up the Wayne Manor driveway. He was in the middle of fumbling for his key when Alfred opened the door and waved Duke in with a warm smile.

Duke grimaced when he tried to return it, "Hey, Alfred…"

The foyer lights were off, and Duke couldn't have been happier about that.

"Master Duke, allow me."

"Thanks," Duke whispered as he passed Steph's box. He took his shoes off and quietly made his way through the manor. He didn't notice, but all of the curtains on the way to Bruce's room had been pulled shut.

Duke didn’t even shut Bruce’s door when he stumbled in. He face-planted into the black comforter and chucked one of Bruce’s pillows at the door. It hit with a satisfying thud, and the door drifted shut, leaving Duke in total darkness, save for the green glow of Bruce’s alarm clock that sent shivers down his spine.

He blearily flopped a pillow over the alarm clock and passed out on top of the bed.

# Summer is the best part of being a teenager hundreds of miles from home and laying low because everything's annoying or out to get you, or, rather, trying to lay low

Danny liked Duke, but the guy had places to be that weren't babysitting some shitty teenager because he was worried about them. Danny stepped off the carriage and vanished into the chaos of the platform.

He hunted down one of the bakeries in Robinson Square, and bought a good six loaves of bread, and paid with a smile. The clerk was all too happy to packedge the order for him.

The clerk at the convenience store he swung by afterwards only eyed him with suspicion. Danny picked up a few jars of peanut butter and a box of compostable cutlery. He made direct eye contact with the store's clerk and put everything on the counter as he paid. He gave a tight smile and left with the receipt in his pocket.

He'd toss it when the food was gone.

Danny left the convenience store and walked along the avenue with the paper bag from the bakery in one hand and the items from the store tucked into his front pouch. He paused by the outside of a cafe to use their wifi for a moment and sent wishes for a happy belated first day of summer. He closed the server before he could see their replies. He didn't want to bring them down with his weird mood.

Danny had no problems crossing the street over into Robinson Park, and disappearing down a secluded storm drain for the time being. He let himself sink through the drain in a freefall. He didn't bother climbing down the ladder or walking. Why bother making things even harder on himself, really, when all he wanted to do was float around and eat in peace.

Danny looked down at the bag from the bakery with a frown, "Damn, I'm way too used to buying food to feed an army now. Only Tucker could eat so many peanut butter sandwiches."

He floated down the mossy tunnel, away from anyone else that was going to get on his nerves.

**Danny:** By the way, happy way-late first day of summer. I hope you guys had a blast, but not in the ghost attack way

**Tucker:** We did. No ghosts, played Doom, Sam kicked my ass, and we had pizza. Exams sucked, sure, but honestly that wasn't terrible.

**Tucker:** It was awkward as hell, though.

**Sam: Yeah.**

**Sam:** Lancer kept us back after exams to ask about you.

**Jazz:** He did the same with me too. He brought me into the teachers' lounge, and he asked how I was doing and if I knew if you were okay.

**Tucker:** We didn't get this far by trusting adults, but, damn, I really want to tell him. I think he blames himself?

**Tucker:** Like, for all the detentions and things that put Danny in the path of Mr. and Mrs. Fenton.

**Sam:** It's kind of sad, honestly.

**Sam:** And honourable, I guess.

**Sam:** But he's a mandated reporter. If we tell him, then Danny's screwed and so is Jazz.

It was chilly despite the growing summer heat above. The running water below Danny's feet generated a soft breeze, though the cold wind didn't bother him at all.

He sat perched atop pipes that ran across the expanse of the tunnel. The bag of bread was tucked under his arm securely. The open jar of peanut butter was snug between his crossed

legs with the knife stuck into the peanut butter as he ate his second sandwich.

He smiled softly in the silence, and just relaxed.

The sounds of disturbed water came from down the tunnel. Something large. Danny tilted his head as he listened. Chilled fog filled the air in front of him as he exhaled.

“Something like Skulker? … Nah, too slow, pro’ly closer to Fros’bite,” Danny frowned as he swallowed the last of his sandwich.

As the sound of disturbed water got louder, the sound of mumbling quickly grew. Danny watched as a huge body turned down the tunnel in front of him.

Massive hands pushed off of the wall as the being turned. A man stared down the hall as he splashed.

“Solomon Grundy…”

He was both pale and not pale. His suit was torn and tattered, and he had a noose around his neck that made Danny want to hurl up the sandwich he just ate.

“Born on a Mond-y…”

Danny swallowed the last of his sandwich as he made eye contact from across the long brick tunnel. A scowl rested on his gray brow as he stomped closer to Danny, and Danny watched as the man’s shoulders bulked with tension.

“Christened on a Tuesday, took ill Thursday, grew worse Friday, died Saturday, buried Sunday, and that was the end of Solomon Grundy,” Danny chimed cheekily in a sing-song tone.

The man clenched his hands, but nodded sharply at his statement like someone on a hairpin trigger.

Danny pretended he didn't notice the dead man in the act of squaring up, and continued to ramble, "Except, you don't feel very 'ended' to me. Dead? Definitely, but not ended. Assuming you're Mr. Grundy and not just someone who likes nursery rhymes."

"No one bother Grundy," Grundy growled.

"Oh, sorry, I'm not trying to bother you," Danny winced.

"Batman said he'd keep pests away so Grundy don't kill pests," Grundy growled. One of his massive hands reached out, ready to yank Danny down from the massive sewage pipe, "But Batman not here!"

Danny quickly stuffed the lids on the jar, uncaring of how the knife was squished inside as Grundy's hand wrapped around his calve in a bruising grip. The behemoth yanked, and the pipe disappeared from beneath Danny as he flew from his place on top of it.

Danny slid off the pipe with one of his legs seized in Grundy's huge, meaty hand, but he never hit the water. He clutched the bag of bread in one hand and the jar of peanut butter in the other as he hovered in front of Grundy.

"I'm not a pest, though," Danny denied.

The slowly building sound of Grundy's snarling felt like a familiar battle cry, though Danny wouldn't bring himself to fight the undead man before him if he could get away with it. It'd be a waste of bread.

The familiar ring of white light spread out from his core and split to pass over all of his limbs.

In the place of a scruffy homeless teen with jeans, sneakers, and a weirdly bulky sweater was the same scruffy teen, but dressed in a black and white hazmat suit with a bag of bread in one hand and peanut butter in the other.

He stared back at Grundy from where he stayed floating with one leg still in Grundy's clutches, with toxic green eyes, almost translucent skin, and death-white hair.

"I'm like you," Danny coaxed.

Danny stayed still in the grasp of Mr. Grundy willingly despite being able to phase out of it.

"I'm Danny Phantom."

The introduction was met with silence. The only sound in the maintenance tunnel was the rushing sewage below.

"I've got lunch if you like peanut butter?"

Grundy let go of the dead teen's leg and leaned in until he was towering over the teen, though the teen didn't cower.

He stared up at the frown etched into Grundy's face.

"Even if you're going to kick my ass today, we're still going to be friends. Do you want to know why?" Danny asked, repositioning himself so he was next to Grundy rather than underneath him. He sat in the air floating with his legs crossed.

He set the peanut butter back in his lap and cracked it open.

“Because you like Grundy,” He parroted skeptically.

“Yep, and half-ghosts and, uh, zombies, gotta stick together. Honestly a lot of the ghosts I fight with are my frenemies. You’d fit right in… That’s not the only reason, I guess,” Danny rambled, slathering the peanut butter on, and smacking it against another slice.

Danny held it out to Grundy, and when the sandwich was taken, he smirked. He didn’t respond, but Solomon Grundy’s faded red eyes stared down at him still. Danny didn't react as he began making the next sandwich as he floated ahead of Grundy.

He phased a hand through the paper bag and retrieved two more slices to cover in peanut butter.

“So, uh, I’m the King of the Ghost Zone. It’s sort of my job to look out for dead beings, keeping the balance, things like that, and that was my job before I became the king, too. I don’t know. It’s weird, and I’m still processing it, you know?” Danny said with a stilted awkwardness and watched Grundy eat his sandwich as he walked.

Danny did his best to look like he wasn’t uncomfortable with what he was saying, but there was no disguising it.

“So even if you don’t like me, I’m here for you. If you need me, even if you don’t want me,” Danny declared.

“Even if Grundy don’t want Danny,” Grundy repeated with a raised brow.

“Yeah. Bet that sounds kinda crazy, huh?” Danny shrugged, passing the next sandwich over, “By the way, I’m going by Tommy Kingdan, but you’re like me. You can know, but keep it between us, yeah?”

Grundy gave a squint, “King Danny.”

“Yeah, I know. My best friends are fucking hilarious. They did a great job at picking a new name, didn’t they?” Danny snickered, “You can call me King Danny, I guess. If you want to. It’s close enough to my last name here, even if I don’t really like the ‘King’ part so much now that it’s true.”

The halfa offered up another sandwich with a smile, and basked in the feeling of having someone like him close by.

“Maybe I am a pest after all,” Danny teased  as he moved against the wall, letting Grundy pick which direction they'd go once they got to the junction, “But I’m you’re kind of pest. Think that’s enough to be friends?”

Grundy didn’t say a word as he lumbered right, but neither did he swat Danny away when he followed alongside the sort-of look alike. Well, their hair looked alike. Danny figured it was that and the fact that he could fly and turn into a ghost, or disguise himself as human. Whichever Grundy thought it was.

It seemed to be enough proof for Grundy.

*“Give me back my son, you monster! How could you steal him from me?! How could you pretend to be my sweet boy?!”*

*“I didn’t! I’m not! Mom, it’s me! Please, I’m still me…”*

Danny was pretty sure Grundy didn’t believe him or anything, but he seemed amused.

Danny would take it. It was better than aggression, and that was something he could work with.

A couple hours had passed since he met Solomon Grundy. The sandwiches had run out a long time ago, and, after transforming back into good old Danny Fenton, he now had three empty peanut butter jars stuffed into his backpack right next to the rest of the cutlery and the bags from the food. He'd toss them out properly later.

Danny could tell he wasn't a ghost, but he wasn't a half ghost who was just in their human form. Solomon Grundy clearly wasn't a "normal" human and was clearly undead.

He floated quietly alongside his new zombie buddy, and, honestly, that was a pretty cool experience. Ghosts were one thing. The only zombies he'd really met were the frankenfood in the Fentonworks fridges.

"Solomon Grundy…"

He was a pretty grumpy, stoic guy, not that Danny minded.

Just a big grump who's obsession was one nursery rhyme. Someone who didn't seem to know why or how he was back, just that he wanted to exist, and Danny thought that was more than enough of a reason.

"Born on a Mond-y…"

Danny grinned up at the giant man, tapping his duct-taped red sneaker against the top of the river of water below him, splashing Grundy a little bit as he laughed. The sound echoed joyfully through the damp tunnels, bouncing around until it became an indistinguishable, cheery sound.

“We gotta get you some more nursery rhymes,” Danny snickered as he vanished from sight just in time for Grundy to kick a wave of waver at Danny in retaliation, “I totally get why that one’s your favourite, bud, but I imagine the same one all the time gets pretty boring.”

Grundy let out a harsh grunt as Danny popped back into view, “Pest.”

Danny couldn’t stop his peeling laughter. He smiled mischievously.

“Goosy goosy gander, where do I wander? Upstairs and downstairs, and in my lady’s chamber…”

Danny hummed, drifting from one side of the tunnel to the other.

The tunnels were glowing dimly in the small presence of the maintenance lights that sat over sewage controls, though the tunnels far in between only had the light of manhole covers. That wasn’t too bad considering it was midday. Streaks of light illuminated the moldy tunnel from above as they passed through the waterways.

“I came across an old man who wouldn’t say his prayers. I took him by the left leg and threw him down the stairs,” Danny teased with a smirk.

He shook his slightly bruised leg at Grundy.

“Sound familiar?”

“Grundy not looking at old man,” The zombie grumbled, “And Grundy have no stairs to throw pest down.”

Danny stuck his tongue out at Grundy.

The behemoth of a man reached out and wrapped a cold hand around his calve and squeezed before swinging the teen over his back like a sack of potatoes.

The halfa let out a wheeze as he thudded against the muscular back. He let himself hang there, dangling upside down with his arms above his head and his sweater riding up. The bandages across his abdomen kept his torso warm in the damp cold of the sewers. The leg that wasn't snagged by Solomon Grundy was bent and hanging, almost crunched up to his chest by gravity, and bounced along with the giant's rhythmic steps.

A secret smile slowly grew across Danny's face as he let himself hang upside down.

An almost imperceptibly low rumble of deep baritone chuckles slowly resonated from under his back.

# Searching for connection at a place that's open 24/7 but only wanting one person to respond is a painful wait, yet he'd wait forever to return the favour

Grundy's plan to let the kid hang over his shoulder backfired. Once Danny had finally gotten sick of hanging upside down, he sat up and stayed on Grundy's shoulder until the light stopped streaming through the sewer grates.

No matter how many times Grundy pitched him off his shoulder would get him to give up his new spot. Maybe it was the fever pitch of joy in the desolate, repeating tunnels that filled with laughter that could never, would never, haunt the tunnels despite their origin as laughter was known to do in Gotham, or maybe it was the fearlessly returned play from someone a third or even a quarter of Grundy's stature. Regardless, they persisted, and Grundy's cold, burdened shoulders warmed with a weight lighter than the one he already carried.

The glowing streams of light had finally faded, and Danny waited until the hints of twilight vanished completely. He tugged at Grundy's sleeve to get him to pause below a grate and stood up cheekily. Danny used Grundy's shoulders to boost himself up. Grundy didn't bother smacking him for standing on him.

Danny beamed down at him with a wide, feral grin, "See you around, Grundy. Usually, I hang around Crime Alley, the Narrows, and the Bowery, but I'm kind of all over. The sewers are really nice though. I'm going to come visit you, promise."

"Pest…" He huffed.

Danny ignored the pointed frown from the giant corpse in the torn-up suit, and lifted the manhole cover up and out of his way. He scrambled up through the hole and slid the cover back quickly.

He yanked his hood further over his head and darted off into one of the darkened alleys of Chinatown.

Wandering the alleys was nice, familiar territory. Safe, even. He nodded at some of the homeless populace that were ducked away, doing their best to hide in the night like everyone else. They returned the nod, but left him be. One stopped him and asked if he wanted to stay with their group for the night.

“It’s a really nice offer, Parker, but staying still gives me the shivers.”

The older man patted his shoulder, “Don’t worry ‘bout it, we understand, kid. Nice seeing you on our side of the city.”

Danny nodded and moved on like he said. He found one of the many round the clock drive-through coffee joints in the city and tucked himself in back of the building out of sight of the security camera. Using the cafe’s halfway decent free internet, he hopped onto their server and winced at the group chat messages that waited for him.

He let them be, though.

He tapped on Jazz’s name instead.

**Danny:** Hey Jazz, are you alone?

Danny let himself slide down the rough bricks until he was sandwiched behind the dumpsters right next to the employee exit and some liminal space half-inside the bricks. He tucked his phone against his chest and waited. The cold sting of the bin against his forehead as he sat waiting for a response was his only measure of time. He didn’t bother moving to see what time it was on his phone.

It didn’t matter anyways. It was summer.

Danny had nothing but time on his hands.

He smiled softly as he angled his head to watch the ever-flowing stream of people living their lives. Cars containing people looking all sorts of alive circled around the building.

The edges of late twilight bled into the pitch of night. Cars continued to circle the building in waves though never truly leaving the drive through empty for long. Every so often, someone would pull into the drive-through in the middle of a screaming match on their phone, but usually it was a comfortable softness, or a happy chatter if people were talking. And music. Lots of music.

A pair of employees came out to throw out some of the trash in the dumpster Dany had squished himself behind. He shamelessly vanished from sight before they spotted him as they joked around. Pushing and shoving one another, they retreated back into the building as they laughed to themselves. The workers shut the door behind them. The smell of coffee vanished from the air, replaced by the ever-present smell of the old and rotting food in the bin in front of him, but Danny didn't mind.

It was nicer than when Cujo found something nasty in the Zone to roll in. That sucked and bathing a dog in a house with ghost hunting equipment was… entertaining.

Danny relaxed in the constant sounds of Gotham, though the sounds of police scanners coming from the drive through every so often gave him spikes of anxiety. It wasn't bad, and no one spotted him, but it was a lot.

Jazz responded three hours later.

**Jazz:** I am now.

**Danny:** Can I call you?

**Jazz:** Are you safe?

**Danny:** As safe as it gets

Danny cracked a soft smile and tapped on the call button next to Jazz's name on the server.

Jazz's face took up the screen almost immediately. Most of her room was packed into boxes behind her, save for essentials like Bearbert and a small selection of clothing.

"Hey Jazz, you wouldn't believe the crazy couple weeks I've had," Danny said softly. He reached back and pulled his hood up to hide the glow of the phone's light on his face.

"I'd bet," She beamed and laid a hand on her chest with a cheeky grin, "I hear I'm a fair maiden now."

Danny snorted.

"Yeah. So, here's what happened. There was an attempted takeover for turf in the one part of Gotham. It's called Crime Alley and the name's hilarious. It sounds like something you'd come up with," Dany smirked, ignoring Jazz's scowl on the other side of the screen, "Anyways, I was avoiding it. Literally hid underground. I came up, and everything was on fire."

Danny watched Jazz as she sat down on her bed with headphones in her ears so no one else heard Danny.

"I couldn't just… leave. Y'know?" Danny admitted weakly.

"I know," Jazz said with a soft, sad smile, "You're too good for that."

"One of the kids I know," Danny hummed and scrunched his face as he thought, "She runs with, uh, damn, you know, I never paid attention to the name of their gang? It's, like, a bunch of minors. Just a full-on baby gang splitting from one of the criminal organizations, very cute. Come to think of it, they probably don't have a name if they're an off shoot… Anyways, I hear her screaming as I'm looking for anyone in need, right? And I *super* can't leave now."

"You can't leave a kid in danger when you can do something about it," Jazz nodded along.

“Exactly! She’s on the second floor from the roof, but her building was burning fast. I was stuck scaling the outside for real. I cheated a little, but I wasn't going to, you know, if I could help it. I would’ve if I had no other choice,” Danny sighed, “And, to be clear, I didn’t have to. I told her I came from a family of rock climbers, and tried to help her escape the chaos while carrying her unconscious mom, right? Well, it was maybe get shot or definitely get shot at one point. I messed up a little and got shot. She was fine. Delivered her to Red Robin and Nightwing after that.”

Jazz opened her mouth to say something, but she seemed to change her mind and closed her mouth after a moment, “Did you go to the hospital…?”

“Hell *no* ,” Danny denied, “I phased my hand through my stomach and took the bullets out myself and cleaned the alley afterwards, thank you very much.”

“Ah! Like the time you ate your fork at school when mom and dad were using the GAV to protect the kids during recess, right?”

“...I…. didn’t know you saw that,” He said flatly, thinking back on how mom and dad weren't far away from him.

“Well, I *was* just behind the tree you guys were sitting near. You literally ran into me when you were trying to find a place to transform, and I ran off to find a different ‘hiding spot’ to let you have some privacy,” Jazz defended, using her fingers to wrap quotation marks around her sarcasm.

“Hey, it worked, didn’t it?”

“It always worked," Jazz giggled, “If the system works, don’t fix it, right?”

“Something like that,” Danny chuckled, “So, back to what I was saying. Clockwork showed up after that, and I crashed with him for the first few days. He told me I was the king a couple days into the stay and sent me to Fright Knight’s lair to get the Ring of Rage from where we

stashed it for king reasons, and it was better than the flaming crown, so. Ring. Fright Knight scared the shit out of me, and his fucking horse's teeth are unreasonably sharp. I was in and out of it for a week? I think. Time's weird in the Zone, and I was absolutely not keeping track. Got to play fetch with Cujo afterwards. That was fun."

"You… kinda brushed over the whole confrontation with Halloween Horror," Jazz frowned.

"Y'know? I actually like that name for him," He snickered, "But, to be honest, there wasn't much of a confrontation. I ran, knocked myself out, and I think he watched me sleep for a week. Very weird. Very creepy. When I left the Zone, I ended up in one of Gotham's satellite cities. Dinky little place named Bludhaven, apparently. Met Nightwing, he fed me Bat Burger, which, for the record, is not as good as Nasty Burger, and then I wandered around all day. Made a friend, ate peanut butter sandwiches. Now, you're all caught up."

"Oh, Danny…" Jazz sighed. She shook her head with a small frown, "You worry me."

Danny stuck his tongue out, "You never did tell me what school you ended up accepting."

He could see Jazz struggle. Danny knew she wanted to keep the line of inquiry going. She was a baby therapist, after all. Danny could already imagine her confronting him about changing the subject.

She didn't. She'd been dying to tell him, Danny knew, but was paranoid about being the one to reach out.

"Well, if I would have *known* you would have ended up in Gotham, I would have gone there. I got an offer, and Arkham's legendary. Same with Blackgate," Jazz pouted, "Sam and Tucker said it wasn't worth it to be in gothic paradise or tech heaven if it meant that I'd die doing it, so I turned it down."

Danny held in his snickers, but Jazz's frown turned into a scowl, and Danny knew she noticed.

“That being said, I’m not too far away. I’m going to Yale. You’d be able to come see me,” She said hopefully.

“Well, I’d come visit, but, uh, our parents are prone to visiting Vlad, and mom doesnt even like him that much. They’re going to visit you all the time, Jazz,” Danny smiled sadly, “I can’t visit you.”

“Then I’ll come to you,” Jazz decided.

“Jazz…”

“You can’t expect me to be that *close* to you and not actually see you!” Jazz pleaded softly.

Danny tried to not focus on the growing shine of her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Jazz,” Danny whispered, “But I’ll text you whenever I can, and same with calling you. Sam and Tucker too.”

“Danny…”

“I’m serious, Jazz. There’s no safe way to see you. Or Sam and Tucker, for that matter, and if you see Dani, force her to take Tucker’s old cell phone and tell her to never return to Amity,” Danny said sternly, “It’s not safe for you to see me.”

Danny swallowed down his panic at the thought of his parents turning on Jazz, and the call lapsed into silence. It wasn’t comfortable, necessarily, but after so long away from his sister, Danny didn’t mind the awkwardness. She was worried.

She had every right to be, really.

*Jazz was wrong, and the look of fear and horror in her eyes when she found out that mom and dad wouldn't be accepting him as anything less than a lab rat was a look that Danny would never forget. She wanted him to feel comfortable telling mom and dad on his own, convinced that maybe it would work out. After years of consoling Danny on how people would believe what they wanted to believe, regardless of evidence to the contrary, Danny could only imagine how she broke down when she was alone on a self-imposed lockdown in the Ops Center, so mom and dad wouldn't have access to a family vehicle that could fly as Danny fled from home. He knew it ate her up inside.*

"No matter what happens, you'll always be my baby brother," Jazz whispered through the crack in her voice.

"I know," Danny whispered back, "I know."

The silence stayed for a moment before Danny cracked a warm grin, "Can I finally tell you all the awesome parts now?"

"I'd love that, baby brother."

Jazz was moving out early for university. She'd be out of Fentonworks in two weeks tops. Something about having convinced mom and dad that leaving earlier was better for the overall adjustment, so she could focus more on her grades come the start of the semester.

Good for her.

*"Get this straight, Danny. You're a Fenton. Fentons get A's, Danny, or, in your father's case, B-'s."*

Danny didn't stay sandwiched behind the dumpsters of the cafe. He passed out in another district of Chinatown underneath the exterior fire escapes of an apartment building in the Young Avenue laneway.

He spent most of the next day relaxing in a playground. The raccoons would probably steal the peanut butter jars from the garbage, but that was the cutest crime that would happen, so Danny figured it was probably fine. Danny dusted his hand off with a sigh and abandoned the park in favour of haunting the closest mom and pop supermarket he could find. It wasn't hard.

The door's chime was broken, and the painfully high tone bugged Danny's ears, but he didn't mind. He gave a wave to the older woman behind the counter and grabbed a little basket.

The quiet isles of the small store felt a lot more welcoming than the last one he'd been in, not that Danny minded too much. It was definitely a nice feeling, though. He walked the aisles, making like he was playing with the neckline of his hoodie as he walked to hide the motion of tugging on the chain of his purse to spin it up and over his shoulder to the front.

Danny glanced down at the contents of his basket and gave them a shake. He added some little guava candies and moved to the counter. He handed a fifty over to the older lady and thanked her kindly for the change. Danny took his bag and left with a small wave.

His hand slid into his pocket and phased the cash into the pocket in the purse that he reserved for his smaller amounts of cash.

Danny moved as though he was adjusting his sweater as he passed through the next crosswalk. He shunted his purse back between him and his backpack with little more than a sigh. The halfa ducked into an alleyway and continued to move through the streets.

After the third time someone shoulder-chuckled him out of their way on purpose, he put his sunglasses on, unwilling to risk the flecks of green being seen by the wrong person should they appear at all. He didn't bother taking them off even as the sun set.

Just once, the first time in months, actually, Danny stonewalled someone he noticed was about to shove him on purpose.

As the man stumbled to the ground behind him, Danny kept walking. It felt like he was taking a clean breath of air even in the smog of the evening rush.

# Back-alley somersaults and attempted avoidance (surprise, surprise) don’t mix, but no one’s going to stop you if you’re going to try to walk it off

Chapter Summary

🎃

The first weeks of summer were quiet. He didn’t really bother with returning to Crime Alley except to see how the repairs were going.

Too many creepy-crawly crisis teams.

He spotted Jesse out with someone he figured was her dad. She seemed happy enough. Her hair looked freshly dyed. It was a lighter blue than before, but Danny had a feeling it would probably be gone the next time he saw her. Neon blue was a pretty attention grabbing colour for a runner.

Danny snickered to himself and vanished back into the alley he came from with his hands stuffed in the worn pockets of his jeans.

He spotted Devin scrambling into his and Lavender’s apartment building as he headed towards Burnley one day and figured they were doing well, all things considered.

The neighborhood was healing just as it always would.

Danny didn’t stay for long.

On one of his Alley visits, however, he did stay long enough to hunt down a mechanic shop. Mechanic shops were a popular staple in Gotham. That had been something that might have confused Danny, but it made sense in a huge city like Gotham.

Then, Danny had watched some angry dude on steroids kick cars out of his way as he got swarmed by bats, and everything made even more sense.

Danny let himself smirk as he rounded a corner to the brick building down Farlow Street with three huge red garage style doors.

It hadn't been hard to hunt down a decent set of high-quality walkie talkies, and, by that, Danny of course meant that he stole them from the asshole station worker in the middle of rush hour as revenge for last time. Was hunting down the asshole subway workers to make their lives inconvenient petty as hell? Yes, and Danny couldn't care less. The station would cover it anyways.

He made his way through the dark of the shop, being very careful not to bump into anything as he hunted down the tools he needed to rewire the set of walkie-talkies. He quickly found a spot to tuck himself in.

After so long of dealing with Fentonworks' products, it was a piece of cake to gut the walkie talkie, rewire everything into a closed two-way radio, and carefully saturate the inside with ectoplasm before freezing the insides solid.

He left everything where he found it and drifted back through the bricks not ten minutes after he phased inside the stained yet spotless shop.

The fact that he immediately flipped ass over tea kettle for waltzing into a motorcycle that hadn't been there before was something he'd never live down if anyone saw it.

Danny held in a groan as he pushed himself up into a sitting position.

On the other side of the laneway, opposite to where Danny had entered, stood a broad dude in a tan leather jacket and a shiny red helmet.

“Fucking swear I saw him come down this way.”

Danny could barely hear him, but the laneway was empty of sound.

All he had to do was leave.

Before he could, he felt his stupid mouth open.

“Who? Me?” Danny asked from his spot sitting next to Red Hood’s motorcycle.

Red Hood whipped around with a pistol drawn and aimed before Danny could blink. He took in a slow breath of cold air as he stared at the crime lord. Danny knew if he chose to fire, it would be a hard sell to pretend the marksman missed.

*He wondered if he would even have to play it off.*

He didn’t fire. Red Hood tucked the gun away with little fanfare.

“Actually? Yes. You’re a hard guy to track down.”

Jason found himself staring into ice blue eyes. The new angle of the body made the outline of a backpack underneath the sweater more visible, and Jason only knew of one teenager who wore their backpack underneath a pullover hoodie.

He pretended that appearing out of nowhere while being hunted down by an ex-Bat who'd caught a glimpse of a person of interest was normal for anyone other than another Bat.

"... And you're tracking me down… Why?" Tommy asked. The kid didn't bother to hide his suspicion, and Jason did nothing to hide from the examining gaze.

Jason casually strolled back down the alley. He kept his eyes peeled for any sign of discomfort or movement to flee, "Tommy, right? The Alley Kids call you Snacks. Said you were one of the good ones."

The scruffy teen said nothing for a while, apparently weighing the word of Red Hood against whatever desire the kid had to get the fuck out of dodge. Hood couldn't blame the kid. He'd just had a gun pulled on him after all.

"Yeah, I'm Tommy," The teen nodded hesitantly. The tightness in the kid's shoulder's vanished, and Jason watched Tommy relax, "They tell me the same thing about you. Didn't think they'd bother mentioning me though."

"Nah, they adore you," Red Hood said, giving Tommy space as he slowly leaned on the scummy wall next to where he parked the motorcycle.

"They think I'm fucking weird," Tommy said with a small grin.

"Is it the smile?" Jason teased softly as he crossed his arms.

Tommy shrugged from his spot on the ground. He rocked forward and tucked his feet underneath him. He dusted his jeans off as he stood up, "And the snacks, of course. Sharing isn't a thing around here, apparently."

“Speaking of… Tommy, you saved a lot of people by chatting with Lavender about what you saw,” Jason broached carefully. He was very aware of the kid’s ability to fucking disappear, and if the kid ran off, he’d never hear the end of it.

Tommy frowned, “I wouldn’t know. I wasn’t around long for the turf war.”

“Liar. I heard about Jesse,” Jason snorted.

Jason’s statement garnered no reaction whatsoever as Tommy continued.

“I just thought Lavender and Devin would appreciate it. Devin’s Ike’s second, figured it was a ‘two birds with one stone’ kind of scenario,” Tommy dismissed with an ease that spoke of a life-time of diminishing accomplishments.

“You get hurt at all?”

Jason watched the kid shrug nonchalantly, “I guess, but I took care of it. I’m fine.”

Beneath his helmet, he frowned.

From what he knew, the kid often gave up massive amounts of food (for a street rat’s standard) and put others above himself in a way that left Tommy as the one in danger. Hearing about Lavender’s first encounter with him where he spilled about seeing a gang leader getting executed via firing squad, and Lavender’s last encounter where she said that Tommy had either known or saw the Victor Street take over and came to warn of something going down was already a lot. Now, he’d been caught in the actual turf war itself instead of moving on as he’d told Lavender?

The disregard Tommy was showing didn’t put him off, per say, but it finished a concerning picture in Jason’s mind.

Jason carefully opened up his helmet and took it off. A flash of confusion flashed across Tommy's face when the helmet came off, but he didn't say anything.

"Mind if I have a smoke since we're gonna hang out here for a while?"

"Sure, knock yourself out," Tommy shrugged, turning back to the skyline, "I'd say smoking will kill you, but who am I to judge?"

"What, you smoke?"

"Nah, don't need anything to kill me any faster," Tommy said with a dismissive shooing motion.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Jason teased. The domino on his face hid the serious glint in his eyes.

"Means that someone's gonna annoy me to death, and maybe it'll be you," Tommy snarked.

Jason snorted, "You little shit. I thought you were going to say you had lung cancer or something," He joked carefully as he purposely kept the mood light and comfortable.

"Nah, nothing like cancer," Tommy waved off.

He froze.

Jason frowned and kept his smokes in his jacket. He gave the aloof teen a once-over. Tommy's loose posture betrayed none of the exhaustion etched under his eyes.

He moved in closer and spoke softly, “You wanna talk about it?”

“Do you?” Tommy returned with a neutral expression.

It took Jason a moment too long to recognize that Tommy’s neutral offer was the same one he’d get from Roy: An open offer to listen with no judgement rather than the kind of neutral expression someone wore when toeing uncomfortable lines of conversation.

It made no sense to Jason…

He'd missed something.

The quiet of the warm laneway hung for a moment. Jason didn’t hurry to end the weirdly comfortable lull as he thought for a moment.

“If you want to,” Jason offered.

“Okay,” Tommy smiled with a careless shrug. He bent forwards into a stretch, dusted off his pants, and stood back up straight with a jiggle that re-adjusted his backpack beneath his sweater.

“Okay?” Hood confirmed softly, “If you ever feel comfortable going into details, I’ll listen, but can I ask you somethin’?”

“Sure, I guess,” Tommy nodded and flopped his head to the side lazily. He gazed into the lenses of Red Hood’s domino mask.

“Is your *condition* part of why you’re on the streets?”

“Oh, it’s absolutely the reason,” Tommy shrugged, “Not like I could really help it, you know?”

“Shit, kid…” Jason’s expression melted. He let out a controlled, weighted sigh, “Is it treatable?”

“Uh, no?” Tommy furrowed his brows, “You can’t treat… I mean, I guess it’s not like you’d know anything about it, honestly. It’s, y’know, rare.”

Jason’s brows furrowed as he listened, and strong concern etched itself in a frown on his face as Tommy set his hands in his pocket and rolled back on his heels with a cheeky grin.

“Truly, you have to be more of a freak of nature than us regular old freaks of nature. *Rare* , rare,” Tommy laughed.

Tommy playfully punched Jason’s arm softly with an air of genuine joy that hurt to see, but the shine of Tommy’s eyes was too bright to be fake.

"Doesn't really matter, though, does it?" Tommy asked with a tilted head and a smile as he looked up into Red Hood's domino.

"I think it matters, Snacks, but if you don't, that's okay. Shit's overwhelming to think about if you dwell on the specifics," Jason sympathized, "And I won't make you do that."

Tommy shrugged, "Hey, Hood, my condition doesn't bother me that much. Just others, y'know? So, me being in Gotham away from people being less than happy about me being me has been good. Hard, but good. Definitely less stressful."

Jason nodded, “Well, if it makes any difference to you, know your condition ain’t going to bother me, y’hear me? And if you need anything, you let me know.”

Tommy snorted and shrugged. He flopped himself against the handlebar of Hood's motorcycle like a damsel in distress.

"Sure, Hood, lemme just waltz into your home base filled with your whole-ass crime family whenever I need something," He said with overflowing sarcasm.

Jason leaned over the seat and towered over where Tommy was perched dramatically, "Please do. I'm serious. If you need help, or a place to crash? Find me. If your condition ever gets worse? Call me, and if you don't have a way to do that, I'll get you a burner."

Tommy's smile slid away as he looked up in confusion, "Uh, I'm not going to run and bug you. That's a little much, don't you think? Besides, I'm good, and yes, I have my own phone, thanks."

Jason backed up to let Tommy stand. The kid readjusted his sweater and cocked his head.

"Why even offer that?"

"You have no idea how much I owe you for keeping my Alley standing, kid," Jason said, putting a hand on his shoulder. The crime boss squeezed softly, "No strings. I'm serious. You come to me any time."

Tommy opened his mouth to say something but abandoned the action. Instead, a thoughtful frown settled on his face.

"I…" Tommy started, "I have scissors. In my bag."

"Yeah?"

Tommy reached up and tugged at his hair with a grimace. Jason watched his fingers snag in the longer hair.

“Could you help me cut some of this back? The front isn’t as hard because there's mirrors in public bathrooms, but I’m not comfortable with getting anyone to help me with the back. It’s just a mess of knots, and long, and I hate it,” Tommy asked timidly.

The kid was tugging on a particular lock of hair near the nape of his neck. Jason figured that section probably rubbed against his hoodie constantly.

He clicked his helmet back on.

“C’mon, kid, let’s take a ride. We’ll go to the closest public bathroom, okay?” He asked, swinging a leg over the seat of his bike. He offered a hand to the teen, “But you gotta ride in front in case someone tries to start shit.”

Tommy shuffled for a second before nodding. Jason took his hand and helped him up onto the motorcycle. He set his hands on the handles, kicked the stand up, and kickstarted his beast of a bike before taking off into the dark streets of the Alley.

From over Tommy’s shoulder, he could see a wide smile and an excited joy that lit up the kids face.

Everyone loves motorcycles.

# Hairy times in public bathrooms, inheritance hope-nots, and having a permanent way to bother your friend with games of tag.

Tommy stood in the warm chill of the bathroom with his hoodie and his sweater on the ground under the sink as Red Hood stood behind him with the set of scissors the kid kept in his bag.

“So, you don’t trust anyone to cut your hair, but you’re okay with me? I’m honoured, kid,” Jason carefully teased a mat of hair loose before snipping it free. He evened the back out with a few more careful snips.

“Well, I figure if I panic and punch you, you'll be fine,” Tommy hummed with a careful shrug, “Besides, you don’t hurt kids, and if you had it out for me, you would've tried to shoot me in the laneway.”

“You’re right on both accounts,” Jason agreed calmly as he caught Tommy’s eye in the mirror. He tapped his body armor with his knuckles, “Jesse tells me you’re a strong fucker, but I can take hits from Bane, and kids don’t make my hit lists.”

“I haven’t actually met Bane yet,” Tommy hummed.

“Yeah, he’s still hiding his ugly mug from me and trying to lay low for pissing me off back in February. Big hulking dude, bald, hate’s jackets.”

“Oh, never mind. Haven’t met him, but I’ve seen him,” Tommy hummed as Jason tugged at a knotted section close to his scalp, “Yeah, some of the homeless guys talk about Bane’s dealers and what not. I never ask more though. Not my circus.”

“And you don’t want Bane as a monkey, I promise,” Jason snickered. He caught the playful smile that was quickly growing on Tommy’s face in the shitty mirror that was covered in graffiti.

Comfortable silence filled the empty public washroom. The tension that had been in Tommy when they first met was long gone, replaced by a snarky little shit. That knowledge made Jason feel relieved. Kid wasn't too jaded.

A miracle, really. In Crime Alley, especially.

Jason trimmed the sides without fanfare and ruffled the teenager's hair when he finished.

Jason spun the scissors around his fingers and stepped back, "Tada. I say it's a bit shitty of a request for saving the city some devastation, but hey. Good start."

Tommy shook his head as he dusted off his shirt, "Nah, I told my friend to watch her back. I didn't know she would have told you. As far as I'm concerned, this is more than enough. Thanks, Mr. Hood."

"Just Hood, kiddo," Jason chuckled.

He pulled a little card with just a number written on it from an inner pocket and held it out. Tommy blinked and took it carefully as he gathered the chopped hair in his hands.

"My number, just like I said," Jason nodded, "Call me."

"Okay, thanks," Tommy smiled. He slipped it into his jean pocket quickly as he threw on his backpack and clambered into his sweater like a flailing kid. He adjusted his sweater and tucked his hands in his front pouch with a grin.

"Seriously? I appreciate the trim. Buzzed is not a good look on me."

Jason smirked under the mask and cocked his head. He rubbed the chin of the helmet as if appraising the scruffy teen in front of him.

“Nah, it would make you look dead. Or maybe just ugly.”

Tommy snorted and socked his shoulder with a surprisingly solid punch as he moved to the door, “Hey, man, don’t type-cast me as the sick and dying kid. Rude.”

“Well, as long as you think it’s as funny as I do," Jason said playfully. He didn’t, not really, but the kid looked happy. He’d take it as a win, “By the way, if you could let the Alley Kids know you didn’t die in a ditch yet, that would be great.”

“You could let them know if you want to,” Tommy shrugged as he grabbed the handle of the door and swung it open, “That many crisis teams crawling through the Alley gives me the creeps. That’s exactly what I don’t need.”

Tommy strolled out of the bathroom. He stuck his tongue out and laughed as the door shut behind him. The thud of Red Hood’s combat boots followed him out of the bathroom.

Hood snickered and opened the door with a sigh, “Alright, alright, ya got me there…”

He paused in the doorway.

Kameron Park was fucking empty. Even turning up the sensitivity on his helmet, he heard no footsteps, none of the laughter from just a second ago, no heat signature other than his own. The swing sets didn’t even sway in the early morning wind. Fucking nothing.

Snacks was long gone, vanished into thin air just as he appeared in the laneway.

Jason backed into the bathroom with a frown. He scanned the floor for any leftover hair and peaked into the trash. He’d only found a few. He’d distracted the kid during clean up, poor guy, must have shoved it in his pocket reflexively.

Jason would love to see his expression when he remembered.

He tapped the side of his helmet.

“Hey, Roy? If I sent you something, could you scan it for me?”

**Danny:** So a crime boss cut my hair as a favor today

**Danny:** That was fun.

**Danny:** Pretty sure he didn’t notice how I left with a pocket full of my hair and that’s a mood

**Tucker:** I want to make a joke of that so fucking badly, but I just need to know how the fuck you managed that??

**Sam:** Oh, it’ll be good. Jazz reads chat whenever she can.

**Sam:** If it’s not good, Danny won’t hear the end of it.

**Danny:** I accidentally saved his territory? But it's actually a good thing, and I’m not a criminal for it

**Sam:** The government doesn’t agree.

**Tucker:** The government thinks you have to be sixteen to drive, and look how great we turned out after Mrs Fenton taught us how to drive tanks down main street and pilot airships.

**Tucker:** Also that being dead is illegal.

**Tucker:** And, oh man, do I have bad news for them.

**Sam:** Obsessed with the hot take “The United States Government is going through a midlife crisis.”

**Danny:** To be fair, the government does have midlife crisis energy

**Danny:** The head of our local government is a half-dead fruitloop who is half dead physically and meta-physically, and who funds a good part of the government, and who also cornered the market on Wisconsin dairy

**Tucker:** Agree. Vlad has midlife crisis energy.

**Danny:** Master of the midlife crisis.

**Sam:** Also master of creeps. He has another cat. We watched him get one from the shelter.

**Tucker:** I think it was a ferret, actually?

**Tucker:** Unclear.

**Danny:** Welcome home, Maddie Number 2

**Tucker:** Obsessed with the idea that he's going to pull a Mambo Number 5.

**Sam:** And they'll all be named Maddie.

**Tucker:** Maddie Number 5

**Danny:** If he dies, you realize he's going to will me his fucking cats, right?

**Sam:** God, I'm hoping.

Jason's cell rang obnoxiously at 8:00 in the morning.

Then at 8:01.

8:02.

8:03.

8:04.

8:05.

At 8:08, Jason answered without looking to see that it was Roy. Only one person would call every minute, anyways.

“What the fuck do you want?” Jason grumbled with his face smushed in the pillow.

“You owe me a new fucking computer.”

“‘Scuse me?”

“You’re fucking excused,” Roy bitched on the other end, “The sample you sent me glitched my computer. It scanned it fucking wrong or some shit, and now the entire thing is fried.”

Jason could practically feel the bangs of Roy’s percussive maintenance all the way in Gotham. He held the phone away from his ear.

“You consider that it was on its way out and that scanning DNA in hair isn’t gonna fry a computer?” Jason said as he unplugged his phone from the charger. He rolled over to face the wall and get comfy again.

“ *You* consider that you just fried my computer?!” Roy yelled into the cellphone.

“I’m a crime boss, you can’t talk to me like this at eight in the morning,” Jason mumbled as he adjusted the blankets and set the phone down on the bed next to him.

“It’s 8:09 in the morning, actually, and at 8:30, the closest computer shop opens where you are going to buy me a replacement fucking computer. Do you understand me?” Roy snipped, “And what do I care that you’re a crime boss now? I’ve known you since pixie boots were in style.”

“Rude, babe.” Jason snorted, “How could you remind me of my dark past like that.”

“New. Computer. Now, booty shorts.”

“Gimme a minute, I’ll send you a chunk of money. Sorry about the computer.” Jason grinned.

“You’re forgiven,” Roy sighed and shifted the phone, “I’m customizing the new one as soon as I get it.”

“Gotcha. I'll send a good couple thousand and only bug you via text today. Have fun.”

“I will, actually. Still got stickers around here somewhere. Might shove some on. This piece of shit is going into my workshop while I figure out if I can still extract data from it.”

Jason fell back asleep with a dumb little smile on his face, and the second he started snoring, Roy hung up.

Roy, in loving courtesy, wired himself the money after his boyfriend passed out mid-call. Jason woke up to a cool ten thousand missing from his account.

Danny vanished behind the washroom with a giddy little smile and let his feet sink past the sewer drain. First Grundy, Now Hood. Granted, he had no idea what was really going on with Red Hood, but, hey, he was for sure another of the Dead Hath Arisen Club.

His sneaker’s touched down in the dim sewers, and he held in the laughter that bubbled in his chest as he added Hood’s number to his contact list. He burnt the hair along with the business card before disappearing into the sewer system of Gotham.

Danny moved down the dirtied tunnels with a growing familiarity as he moved into the older tunnels of the Old Gotham sewers. He hunted through the sewer connections until the familiar shiver ran down his back and through his lungs.

Danny turned the corner to see the tall form of his friend walk the other way down the tunnel, not that he minded.

“Solomon Grundy…” The zombie said to himself.

Danny beamed and flew over, plopping down carelessly on his shoulder, “Born on a Mond-y! Hey, buddy! How’re you doing this morning?”

Grundy’s hand wrapped around his torso and pitched him forwards before Danny could stop him. Danny caught himself mid-air and burst into laughter. He turned around with a dorky grin, and paused.

The usual scowl on Grundy’s face looked way more ingrained into his face, and his eyes had a fire in them like he was geared up for a fight. His clothes were torn up more than before, and there were stains on his hands. Danny’s grin fell, and a neutral expression took over.

“Did someone attack you?” Danny asked.

Grundy didn’t answer him as he continued walking down the tunnel. The fact that he was getting closer to Danny in order to keep walking was a coincidence, but Danny took it as a positive one.

“I’ll fight ‘em,” Danny offered.

“Grundy handle it already,” The zombie huffed as he scooped the floating teen back onto his shoulder, “And Grundy handle it again when Grundy see big lizard wannabe.”

“Oh, okay, no problem then,” Danny wrapped an arm around Solomon’s head to catch himself from tipping over backwards, “I made you something, actually.”

Danny fished one of the walkie-talkies out of his pocket and waited for Grundy to lift his hand before he dropped it into the large palm, “It’s a two-way radio. You don't have to worry about breaking it, either. I fixed that problem for you, and the battery will never die. It’s… renewable energy.”

Grundy raised his hand up. He carefully grabbed the two-way with his other hands and fiddled with the buttons. One of the buttons made a trilling beep that echoed from Danny’s pocket.

Danny chuckled and pulled out the twin two-way. He pressed the button down and raised the walkie-talkie to his mouth, “Solomon Grund-y…”

The walkie-talkie in Grundy’s hand spoke in time with Danny before falling silent with a little trill as Danny let go of the button.

A moment passed before Grundy raised his two-way and pressed the button.

“Born on a Mond-y…”

Danny whooped as he rolled backwards off Grundy’s back. He drifted around to the front of Grundy with a smile.

Danny avoided the hand that reached out for him in favour of darting down the tunnel. He disappeared around the corner and waited, but he didn’t hear the splash of Grundy’s feet.

He pressed the button down with a smile and whispered into the receiver, “Solomon Grund-y.”

A moment passed before Danny could hear Grundy splash down the tunnel.

“Born on a Mond-y,” Came the echoed response from just around the corner. Danny couldn’t help the laugh that escaped as one of Solomon’s arms reached around the corner. The halfa let himself get captured and pulled back around the corner.

Danny gave him a cheeky grin, “Think you can do it again, big guy? Come find me,” Danny teased as he disappeared from view and Grundy’s hand.

Grundy let his hands fall to his side as he stood in the pale blue light of the sewer. It was quiet save for the trickling droplets of water as they dripped down from the sewer grates above.

The two-way clasped in his cold hands beeped to life, and his pest’s voice filtered through.

Grundy continued down the tunnels.

“Hey diddle-diddle, the cat and the fiddle…” Danny said in a singsong tone.

“The cow jumped over the moon…” Grundy trudged through the otherwise voiceless tunnels.

“The little dog laughed to see such a sport…” Kingdan’s voice soon developed an echo from a tunnel nearby. Grundy turned left.

“And the dish ran away with the spoon,” Danny finished from his place on top of some pipes. He watched Grundy round the corner and beamed.

The zombie’s neutral scowl lifted into something more playful as he raised his two-way to his face, “Solomon Grundy… Born on a Mond-y…”

# Parks and recreation make for an amazing way to intrude on a heroes evening, but, hey, midnight’s the new noon, and shadows aren't as dark as people feel like they are

Most of the parks in Gotham were weirdly gothic. Some were older installations from decades and decades ago, so Danny could excuse those ones. Some of them were a lot more recent. Most of them were a lot more recent, actually.

Villain attacks didn’t exclude neighborhood parks, apparently.

Actually, according to some crime statistics Danny saw on a weirdly fun looking infographic, villains would often target Gotham parks as hubs of activities.

Danny was pretty sure GCPD’s Public Relation’s Department was a little stressed out.

One park, Danny had noticed, was in the process of being renovated when he’d first arrived in Gotham.

It had been finished since then. The park was strangely gothic with its cobblestone aesthetic, but without the sharp parts that would arguably be the worst thing a person could add to a playground.

It was that park that showed Danny that all the newer, yet weirdly gothic, parks all looked the same at night. It landed somewhere in the uncanny valley between fully creepy and weirdly electric under the modern streetlights and neon signs that forced Danny to label them with a bizarre steampunk vibe.

The label didn’t fit, but what did Danny care about that as he sat on a swing of the shitty park on the edge of the Upper West Side suburbs overlooking the park that wasn’t anywhere close to passing the vibe check.

Danny lobbed a reasonable guess as to the reason being the pair of glints shining at him being the sewer grate.

He tucked his hands into his hood and pulled the green and black headphones from his ears. He chucked them into his pocket and sat in the comfortable quiet of the park

“Hey,” Danny hummed. He didn’t have to waste effort on being loud in the stillness of the park, not that he was expecting an answer.

“I’ve got more nursery rhymes to bug you with,” Danny teased.

He smiled and pulled the two-way from his backpack. He raised the receiver up, “There once was a man who lived on the moon!”

No trilling beep or duplicated voice rang out from the sewers, but that was fine. Grundy didn’t need to have the two-way on all the time.

Danny smiled and toyed with the volume until it turned off entirely. He opened his mouth to continue the rhyme.

“... And his name…”

Danny put the two-way in his pocket and froze as a harsh, gravelly southern baritone came from the grate.

“Was *Aiken… Drum* .”

Huge claw-tipped fingers reached through the slits and ripped the steel grate down into the sewer like it was paper. A green scaled arm reached out and dug into the soft soil as they climbed up and out of the grate.

The eyes he was watching through the grate raised slowly from the sewer along with a razor-filled snarl.

Danny was pretty sure maintaining eye contact wasn't the rule of survival for encountering eight food mutant crocodile men.

And yet here he was.

"Finally, someone with good fucking taste," Danny said before he could stop himself, "One of the little shits I babysat all the time spoke exclusively in sea shanties and pirate-slang."

"I may have good taste, but you sure don't. You reek of the dead," The huge being chuckled, "Guess I won't eat you tonight."

Danny shrugged, "I mean, if you're going to clock me like that, yeah."

Danny slid off of the bench and walked closer. He offered his hand when he was within fifteen feet, but let the dude covered in scales, well, scutes technically, decide if he wanted to shake it, "Tommy Kingdan. Nice to meet you."

" *Kingdan.* If I couldn't already smell him all over, that'd give away that your Grundy's little pet," The huge crocodile man rumbled, "Waylon, Killer Croc, at yer service."

"Okay. The whole thing? Or do you prefer Killer? Or Croc?" Danny asked as the meta wrapped a giant hand around his, "Or Waylon? What about your feelings on 'mister'?"

The large meta grinned wider and eyed Danny like he was prey.

"Careful with me, shrimp," Killer smirked through his teeth, "I'm volatile."

"Eh, you don't know volatile until you can make explosives with burger sauce. My ex almost blew up a restaurant," Danny shrugged.

Killer Croc yanked his arm, and if Danny was more fragile, he was pretty sure his shoulder would have popped out of his socket as he slid into Killer's personal bubble.

"I know I'm homeless and all, but I will buy you everything you need to brush your fucking teeth. I can see mouth rot, and that shit's not healthy," Danny deadpanned.

"If you think," Killer Croc leaned down so his jaw was angled perfectly to lunge for Danny's throat, "That, even for a *single moment* , being Grundy's little bitch is gonna keep you safe? *Bless* yer little heart."

"Oh well, so be it, you know?" Danny shrugged with an air that said *How did you expect me to fix this?* "But from what I've heard, Grundy can handle you just fine, so I don't need to worry, like, *too* too much, y'know? Like, I see you, and I'm actively acknowledging how you could totally kill me right now, don't get me wrong here, Killer Waylon, but I'm not expecting to be safe just because Grundy can wipe the floor with you in a Bat Burger parking lot."

The hulking crocodile man's shoulders shook with laughter.

"You," He growled, "Are a funny little shit, Kingdan."

Danny jerked his arm back towards himself despite the clawed grasp on his forearm. Waylon took an unexpected step forward, and Danny cheerfully pitched his shoulder up and into his hip bone before rolling the crocodile over his back.

Killer was sprawled on the dewy grass before he could recover his balance.

Danny gently shook his hand, “It really was nice to meet you, Killer Waylon, but you kinda seem like you wanna munch on my neck right now, and, as we’ve already established, I’m sure I won't taste good.”

Danny smiled and removed his hand as Killer Croc rolled over and screamed in rage. The teen backed up slowly to give Mr.(?) Croc some space as he re-oriented himself.

Danny felt his heartbeat quicken with excitement at the thought of getting to brawl a bit after so long of hiding.

Waylon’s claws ripped into the soil as he threw himself into a sprint Grundy’s little shit of a kid.

The foggy lamplights shadowed the slightly manic grin that was stretching across Kingdan’s face. The teal shine of his eyes under the street laps showed only excitement and glee, and Waylon couldn’t decide how he felt about that.

Waylon could see the kid getting ready to brace himself.

The faint sound of tungsten cord could be heard as Kingdan was swiped away, merely a foot from reach, and swung away to safety in a blur of black.

Bruce held Tommy half on his hip as his arm, which was scooped under Tommy’s armpit and wrapped around the homeless teen’s back and backpack, squished poor Tommy snuggly against the Bat’s chest. The vigilante could feel the teen’s feet flail out behind him as he swung them both to safety. Tommy’s arms swung frantically for a moment before they wrapped around his neck.

Bruce quickly shot his grapple at the peak of his swing and sent him and Tommy sailing from the neighborhood.

He could feel the homeless teen's pulse skyrocket.

"So, nice of you to swing by," Tommy mumbled from where his face was smushed against Batman's chest plate, "Very considerate of you, actually. Thanks for the lift."

"You should avoid Killer Croc as much as possible," Batman said lowly.

*Croc. Was it a chosen title, or one bestowed and worn as armor to avoid the hurt? Danny knew the answer, and hoped it was the other. He knew all too well what it was to be dehumanized.*

"Maybe he's tired of not being considered human," Tommy shot back. He curled his legs up so his knees were against Batman's back as the vigilante landed on a roof and sprinted across it before diving off the other side.

*Danny couldn't help but hope Waylon's mom and dad didn't look at him the same way Danny's parents looked at him. He'd never seen his father that devastated, that angry, that guilty… Dad never looked that guilty even when he couldn't remember important dates that meant the world to mom.*

Batman frowned as he shot his line out. Tommy apparently took that as a cue to elaborate on his opinion.

*Did Waylon's parents blame themselves for their kid being a freak too?*

Tommy's legs swung out with the centrifugal force of the swing, "Well, sure, I'm guessing he picked his name, but it feels like he picked it because otherwise it would have been used against him. Turn it into armor, you know? But it's also dehumanizing to be referred to as a monster and something less than an animal."

*Did they look at Waylon and wish…*

“He refers to himself as Killer Croc” Batman answered carefully.

*That the monster they all saw him to be…*

“But I bet you know his name,” Tommy said casually, “I don’t know. Maybe he does likes it that way.”

*Was someone else’s kid and not theirs?*

Batman landed carefully in the shadows of an alley far away from the villain fight that he could hear occurring in his ear as his children descended on Croc. He carefully set Tommy down and scanned him for signs of pain or injury as Tim’s warnings of care if he were to meet Tommy crossed his mind.

*“He’s sick, Bruce, I just know it. I don’t know what he’s got, and I don’t think I want to,” Tim had murmured from where he had his head in his arms with the supercomputer’s screens glaring down at him.*

*Bruce frowned as he tried to imagine how fragile a person with such an aggressive degenerative condition would exist in such a hostile environment.*

“Will you be alright here?” Batman towered over Tommy, and he wasn’t even trying to.

The vigilante was trying to give him as much space as possible, and still the teen was swallowed by his shadow. The lithe teen was shaking softly, and now that he’d been set down, Bruce could see the thin, calloused hands peeking out from his baggy sleeve shake more and more as he was out of danger, not that Bruce could blame the young man.

He didn’t exactly want to leave the teen alone when he was clearly going into shock. Bruce frowned under the cowl. Bruce could see the quickening rise and fall of Tommy’s chest under his sweater.

He could see the teen’s pale skin fade to a deathly translucent as his eyes glazed with manic anxiety.

The teen stepped back from the vigilante and tugged his sweater back down. He gave a small smile to the man he’d been trying to avoid since arriving in Gotham.

*Batman would break his back and leave him to bleed out in the street if he thought he was a meta. The vigilante famously hated metas and famously refused to tolerate them operating within city bounds. Since coming to Gotham, Danny had received one hell of a promotion from Defender of Amity Park and Ghost Kind to Protector and Ruler of the Realm of the fucking Dead.*

“Oh, yeah,” Danny assured as he waved off the question, “I’m okay.”

Danny tried to subtly make up some distance between himself and the vigilante that intruded on Danny’s friend-making.

“You’re going into shock,” The dark knight pointed out softly as cars drove by the mouth of the alley. He carefully moved towards the teen.

“No, you’re going into shock,” Danny murmured reflexively. He moved backwards as Batman stepped forwards.

*And he lived in Gotham. Homeless or not, it was his place of current residence. Danny couldn’t rely on diplomatic immunity. The government actively pursued him. As would Batman if he ever came to the conclusion that Danny was a fugitive.*

Bruce’s concerned frown deepened as he watched the panicked teen try and create space between them. He paused in his advance before the poor teenager could trip and fall back.

*Daniel Fenton: Interdimensional criminal, Dead at fourteen, Ghost ever since then.*

*He made the Most Wanted list at fourteen, but they didn’t know his name. Inviso-Bill, Menace of Amity Park. A John Doe of the Dead.*

*The “Shoot on Sight” order had been a joke until mom and dad upgraded their weaponry.*

“It’s okay, kid,” The vigilante murmured as he held his hands out in a gesture of surrender, “You’re safe here.”

“I… know,” Danny said carefully, but he couldn’t hide the unsure expression on his face as a shudder ran through his body.

*Would Batman do the same? Would Batman beat him to a bloody pulp?*

“Croc is being taken care of,” Danny didn’t respond to the assurance.

*Danny didn’t want Croc to be taken care of. He wanted Waylon to be okay.*

“You’re safe, I promise,” Batman lowered his hands to his side, but kept them clearly visible to the skittish teen.

“I know,” Danny nodded as the tremors simmered down into nothingness. *And I don’t believe you.*

Danny moved backwards into the alley and kept his eyes trained on Batman.

Bruce shot a line to the roof to leave before he could accidentally make Tommy’s growing panic attack worse. As he landed on the rooftop’s ledge, he cast a glance back into the dark of the dead-end alleyway.

Tommy was gone.

# Catching death in the moment between my heartbeats, I'll run from what I fear, and embrace my love in the interim

Danny found he was hard-pressed to care about disappearing from the alleyway.

The very second Danny saw Batman's piercing gaze move off of him, Danny moved deep into the shadows of the dead-end alley and vanished from sight before sinking down past the pavement and grime as soon as his feet felt a sewer grate.

The tunnel down seemed to pass so slowly despite the free fall. Danny didn't care. He didn't bother catching himself midair. He hit the slippery grate of the bottom of the tunnel and took off in a sprint.

The disgusting water splashed bitingly around his shins and knees as he ran, but the anxiety that electrocuted his nerves didn't care. He had to run.

*Batman was behind him.*

He had to get away before Batman ruined everything.

*But he wanted to help. He seemed to want to help.*

Not that it mattered because Batman would hate him on principle.

Danny's lungs heaved as he slid around the corners of the huge tubes.

*He could hear the GAV as it raced down the interstate. He could feel it in his chest as if he was in the tank, but he wasn't. He would never again be in his family's recreational vehicle. He would never again step foot in Amity Park, Illinois. He might never again see his best friends.*

*He would ever see his parents smile at him again. He'd never be around to listen to them argue about Christmas and drive him absolutely insane. Danny would never have them bring dinner to life in an impossible set of circumstances that seemed to happen every other day, even if they ordered pizza.*

Danny could feel the tears as they dripped down his cheeks and into his sweater as they trailed down his neck.

Danny couldn't feel his heartbeat anymore.

His skin was cooling rapidly. The tremors started up again, and his hands shook in spite of being clenched for dear life.

*He would never again have Jazz hug him as he threw a tantrum over an essay. He would never have Jazz hover over him for everything because she was worried, and it was her job to worry. Hers to worry, his to protect.*

*In the end, they both failed.*

*But only Danny paid the consequences.*

A sob tore its way from Danny's throat and echoed horribly in the tunnel.

It sounded like someone was drowning, but you couldn't drown if you were already dead.

Danny wasn't drowning, and Batman didn't haunt his dreams.

He was only fourteen.

*His parents would never watch him graduate, though that would have been debatable regardless. He would never walk across the stage with Sam and Tucker, or have Jazz congratulate him for his accomplishment.*

He was only fifteen.

*Danny could only wonder if Lancer would be more proud of his accomplishments if he knew what Danny was dealing with in and out of school.*

He was only sixteen.

*It's not his fault no one else could take care of the ghosts.*

He was only trying his best.

*If only his best would ever be enough.*

Danny clamoured his way up onto a maintenance platform. His shaking legs collapsed from under him, and he fell to his hands and knees as he heaved breath in and out of his chest forcefully.

He smacked his breastbone as a coughing fit racked through his body. He continued to fight his way through breathing as he tried to trick his body into restarting his heart.

He hung his head as he rasped. His legs were slowly fading from where his HAZMAT suit covered him, leaving only ripped jeans and sneakers.

He did his best to take slower and slower breaths as his fluttering heart sparked to life.

He vomited into the sewer water and threw his back against the sewer wall.

The young halfa didn't bother fighting the tears as they continued to carve riverbeds in their descent.

Danny's heart gave feeble and failing twitches from where it was safely tucked behind his ribs, and the pain of his heart restarting rain hot through his chest despite the damp cold seeping into his bones.

Hours had passed before Danny's legs would let him move. Danny checked his phone with a wheeze as another coughing fit made his body spasm. Four in the morning.

Fucking fantastic.

Danny shakily pulled himself up onto his feet and made his way up the maintenance ladder.

The Diamond District wasn't a bad place to crawl out of. He recognized the code above the panel.

He'd beat the morning rush in this part of town.

Danny jerkily pulled himself up and threw the sewer grate, keeping an eye on his arms in front of him to make sure they were faded from view.

His hands pulled himself up onto wet asphalt in the middle of an intersection.

Danny could feel the cars pass him as the light swap from green to red. Some people looked miserable. Danny couldn't blame them. Four in the morning was never an overly joyful hour. People were either exhausted and heading home from night shift or exhausted and heading in for their dayshift.

Danny was just exhausted.

He paid no mind to the oncoming traffic as he moved for the sidewalk. Any car, truck, or transport that moved into his space, he let himself move right on through. He joined a small crowd of people as they crossed through the pedestrian walkway and carefully let himself fade back into view.

He wandered the streets of Gotham as his heartbeat, trying to figure out how to fall into a normal rhythm again as Danny pretended that he was no different from anybody else that walked past him.

Danny waited until the morning rush had passed and his pants had dried before he swung by one of the cafes that he tended to frequent.

He ignored that it was close to the university.

*Jazz was going to fulfill her dreams without Danny. Jazz was going to do a lot of things without Danny. Danny was going to miss out on all of it, and it was all his fault.*

That didn't matter.

What mattered was that the little cafe reminded him of Sam and Tucker. Sam, in her efforts to be sustainable, made a little cafe nook in her place, right next to the god damn bowling alley. Danny smiled softly to himself and joined the relatively long line despite it being close to nine or ten in the morning.

The rich smell filled his nose as he waited patiently for his turn to order. As he glanced around, he could tell who was taking summer classes at Gotham U, and it was all too easy to picture Jazz doing the same morning studying in a cafe like this one.

*He was so fucking proud of her.*

His eyes passed over a group of teens, a couple of groups really, but one stood out. They reminded him of Paulina's gang. Rich, popular, looking for a place that was cool but niche enough to become the regular hangout place. The fact that it was occupied by college kids was probably a bonus. Danny didn't care much anymore about those things.

It was hard. He was impossible to compare to, despite the fact that they were clearly in the same age range.

Danny moved forwards to the front of the counter and smiled, "Hey, Felicia!"

A Black girl with her hair pulled up into space buns looked back at Danny with a grin. She was the same height, which was nice. He didn't feel so short around her, not that it mattered, but it was a cool feeling.

"Tommy! Hey, dude! How's it going?" She winked as she grabbed their biggest cup, "Let me take a guess, you're getting your regular?"

"Yeah, but could I get caramel and vanilla too?" Danny chuckled, "And I'm pretty good, actually," He said like a liar, as if he didn't spend all night in the death throes of a panic attack.

"That's good to hear, kid, because you worry me sometimes," Felicia teased as Danny slid over a ten-dollar bill. She didn't bother giving the change back. Tommy wouldn't accept it anyways. He never did, not from any of the baristas, "And that's from someone who watches college kids have breakdowns on the daily."

“It’s fully not my fault,” Danny reminded her, “I seem to give off an energy that attracts assholes, and you know this.”

“I do, and I respect you for it. I don’t know how you deal.”

“I don’t. I’m either ignoring it or I’m gonna roast them back. Half of the time, they’re too stupid to realize they’re the spectacle.” Danny said as he took his drink.

“Amen to that,” Felicia teased.

Danny moved out of the way of the line and picked a table that only had two chairs so as to not occupy that much space.

**Danny:** Batman?

**Danny:** Terrifying

**Danny:** Like, he wasn’t? Because he wasn’t after me? Not yet, anyways

**Danny:** But damn

**Tucker:** Is he really a furry?

**Danny:** He fucking has to be. He’s literally got bat ears I swear

**Danny:** Like, on his cowl

**Danny:** The edge of his cape looks exactly like Sam’s beach cover, with the little scoop cut lining shit at the bottom

**Sam:** Batman has good taste.

**Danny:** Batman ruined a perfectly good evening where I was going to square off in a wrestling match with some dude nicknamed Killer Croc

**Danny:** His real name is Waylon and he has good taste

**Danny:** Except for the fact that he maybe eats people? Unclear

**Tucker:** Danny Fenton draws the line at cannibalism, confirmed.

**Tucker:** Wait what do you mean unclear???

**Tucker:** Danny???

**Danny:** He told me I smell like the dead, and it freaked me the fuck out

**Danny:** Dude didn't have to read me like that in a park at midnight, you know? Like jeez

**Danny:** It's cool though, he just meant he could smell that I'd been hanging out with his rival (?) Solomon Grundy

**Danny:** Who is dead, and also alive. He's a zombie

**Danny:** Met someone else who is dead too, but unlike Grundy, I don't think it's common knowledge, so I'm going to respect his right to privacy on this one

**Tucker:** Danny's a king of the people.

**Tucker:** So you're telling me you went to Gotham and keep finding dead guys??

**Danny:** I mean, I guess so

**Sam:** I personally think that's hilarious.

**Danny:** I personally attest to that

**Danny:** Gotham has a fair amount of ambient spook, like there's places I am NOT a fan of going near. I do, ever once and awhile, go. Just to check

**Sam:** Well, to be fair, the only place that really gives off those vibes here is the GIW lab

**Tucker:** That place escalated from goofball central to goofballs who also are problematic and dangerous so fucking fast.

**Tucker:** I kind of can't believe it?

**Danny:** I have no idea how to fix the horrible shit my parents have started, and since everything is legal on their end (whack), we can't really change it?

**Sam:** I hope Vlad is proud of himself tbh.

**Sam:** And the next time my parents are invited to his Christmas gala, I'm spiking mom's chocolate chip cookies with laxatives because he deserves to shit himself for all he's done.

**Tucker:** Do you think he ever feels remorse?

**Danny:** Hell no, not that fruitloop.

**Danny:** The guy who's obsessed with making my life a living hell until I can't live in it anymore? And succeeded?

**Danny:** He would sell my soul to Pariah Dark for one glance from my mother, regardless of if it was a glare or apathetic

**Danny:** And he already gets those for free

Danny set his phone down as he grabbed his straw. He pulled the paper wrapping off and stuck it in the sugary frozen coffee drink with a dozen some odd espresso shots inside.

Danny was pretty sure Felicia stopped bothering to count when it came down to adding up however many death shots Tommy was getting in his drink. At this point, he was too afraid to ask.

He watched the lineup for the little cafe quickly begin to wind around tables.

“Okay, Demon, have fun with your friends,” A breathless voice came from the doorway. Danny looked over.

An older teen with his hair cut short on the bottom but longer on top so it flowed across his head stood in the doorway of the cafe in a dark red button up shirt with a shorter, much more tan teen with neatly buzzed hair that was just to say longer in front.

“Tt, I don’t need your wishes for me to have a good time, Drake,” The younger teen spit as his piercing green eyes scanned the cafe before walking over to Not-Paulina’s group with a bit of a tough air. Danny believed this kid more than he believed Dash in regards to the cool tough guy act. It felt like he was actively trying not to be so rough and tumble.

They were going to eat him alive or die trying, Danny snorted. He looked back at the guy in red.

The other teen, Drake, appeared to be having an active crisis as he looked at the line.

“Fuck, I’m going to be so, so late for my meeting,” The lithe older teen mourned.

Danny sighed and stood up. He crossed the distance to the door without a fuss and sat the huge monstrosity in the teen's hands, "No you won't. Here, dude. I didn't drink it."

Drake blinked at him with an expression Danny couldn't read, "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, go on. It's a drink, I can always get another," Danny waved off.

"I'll pay you back for it," Drake said with a weird undertone of determination.

Tim couldn't believe he'd found a lead on Tommy's usual whereabouts by dropping Demon off for his hang out on his way across town.

And here he was, Tommy Dumpster, or Dumpster Tommy.

Fresh off of an encounter with Croc and having had a panic attack or shock afterwards, according to Bruce, and now Tim was stealing his drink. The bags under his puffy eyes told Tim that Tommy had one hell of a night after Croc.

Poor guy probably didn't go to sleep at all.

Tommy just cracked an honest grin, "C'mon dude, just take it and go, or you really will be late for your meeting. Go."

Tommy waved him off gleefully as he moved back to his table.

Danny watched the teen's brain slowly restart, and watched as he took off in some fancy car that looked vaguely reminiscent of something Dash would have gotten for his sweet sixteen, and couldn't help but laugh to himself and shake his head.

Tim looked at the drink in his hands, left the cafe, and pushed the limits of almost-breaking traffic laws to make it to Wayne Enterprises for his board meeting.

He’d adjust his plans when he had a free moment to do that.

# The ante meridiem had the audacity to lead to an afternoon like that, and Danny was alright encouraging murder

He played around on his phone on one of the little server games Tucker was testing out as he waited for the line to die down a little. He kinda had nothing but time on his hands.

He could hear the teens “Demon” had sat with throwing subtle insults towards him, and, by the time the long line diminished as he waited at a table for a good time to replace his drink, he knew too much about this Demon dude that was almost-certainly around his age because one of the girls said something about invitations to her Quinceanera.

Demon was, technically speaking, “new” to Gotham, or maybe Gotham’s elite, based on how someone talked about something that had happened in the cool kids club at some point in grade five, but “Oh, sorry, you wouldn’t know about that, would you?”

That Demon was some sort of Middle Eastern? Maybe. Danny was unclear on that one. They kept making subtle jabs at his heritage, but they kept referencing different countries, and Danny couldn’t possibly take a guess at which was actually where he was from or which his family was from. Whatever one applied to his case. Danny figured the first of those options, because while the guy looked like he was picking up on the insults, he was missing a lot of the subtler ones thanks to the context they were being made in.

Somehow, Demon was both popular and incredibly unpopular, which, apparently, was leading to the interesting scenario of “Apparently we have to invite this guy, but we’re going to make sure we insult him the entire time.”

Danny figured that whoever this kid’s dad was, he sure as shit had no idea his son was being racially targeted by his peers.

Danny continued to listen.

All of Demon’s “friends” had managed to get their drinks already, but they must have been in the cafe for a while.

They, somehow, *some fucking way,* planned ahead of time to occupy this cafe from the time they opened until now, and, from what Danny gathered, managed to drain any vegan milk or cream alternative.

This, Danny only knew, because he watched one of the girls hand Demon a milkshake and say, “Sorry. I asked, and they had no soy milk or any nut or oat either. The best I could do was goat milk,” In that sickly sweet voice that Danny heard Pauline use too many times. Danny scanned the display items for what food was available and noted how the some of the vegan pastries were completely sold out, but some were sitting at the same table as the kids.

Danny was also certain the kid didn’t suspect it was their doing because he had a feeling there would be a lot more anger in his eyes.

Danny shouldn’t step in. He shouldn’t. He was going to stay sitting down and leave things alone.

He *was.*

He made his way to where Demon was sitting at the table, “Hey, dude, can I talk to you really quick?”

“Oh wow, getting *propositions* now, are we Damian?” One of the bigger built teens smiled with a sneer carefully tucked in between the lines.

Great, Demon had a Dash.

Danny could even breathe without his own Dash trying to make his life miserable, and Demon was missing half the battlefield.

Danny couldn’t even dream of holding back the cold anger.

“Okay, I *was* going to pull you aside to chat but if you assholes wanna be called out in the middle of a cafe, I can do that too,” Danny glared, “You guys are fucking racist, and you’re fucking bullies. Who fucking comes to an establishment hours ahead just to make sure they use up all the dairy alternatives?!” Danny made a confused face as he pulled Demon, Damian, out of the booth by his sleeve.

He didn’t bother looking back to see if Damian was alright with him pulling him out of that situation. He had a feeling that if he left Damian alone with them, they'd be beaten to a pulp.

If Danny let him stay, he would cheer.

Danny took deeper breaths and thanked literally anyone who was out there that hadn’t happened in a school.

No, Sidney Poindexter.

No, thank you.

“Sorry for intruding like that, but your so-called friends were pissing me off. I couldn’t listen to that if it was about my best friend, and I couldn’t listen to them eat you alive like that. Bullies are bullies, racist bullies are another thing. Neither are okay, but it's the extra mile that makes me pissed off.” Danny sighed as he stopped tugging the poor guy.

He stepped back and looked at him. Finally, someone who was shorter than him. It was just to say by an inch or two, but Danny was counting it as a win. He was dressed casually but in a neat enough way that screamed how he was dressing down. The dress pants were not helping either.

Danny held in the manic urge to cackle over how different they looked.

“Tt, I could handle such nonsense,” Damian dismissed with a scowl, “You have no need to step in on my behalf.”

“I get that, but also they were saying some really gross shit that I think you were missing context on in order to fully understand how gross they were being?” Danny said with an unsure expression. He shuddered as he shook his head, “Honestly, you should consider getting those asshole’s in trouble. I’m sure whatever private school they go to will be ecstatic to know they’re treating people like that.”

A moment of silence settled between them as Damian stared down Danny. The way the absent glare sat on his face told Danny the poor guy had the world’s worst resting bitch face.

Sam would be proud.

“Look, why don’t I just show you a nice vegan spot then, as an apology,” Danny offered with a small smile.

Damian’s scowl deepened, “You would do better to grovel for shaming me in such a way. I can fight my own battles.”

“Yeah, I don’t doubt you can, but maybe I can tell you more about the bullshit they were spewing in order for you to better rip them and their precious reputations to shreds,” Danny offered.

He watched the little glimmer of vengeance appear in Damian’s dark emerald eyes. The teen gave a stiff nod.

Danny smiled and began his way down the street. He didn’t bother with small talk. The teen didn’t feel like the small talk type.

Instead, Danny began to explain the slight subtleties of inside jokes and subtle, underhanded bullying methods that are missed when someone doesn’t get the social context of the in-jokes

to begin with, as well as the targeted use of stereotypes disguised as complimentary comments. The more he explained, the more Danny watched the fire in Demon's eyes grow. The expression only worsened when he explained the comment made when Danny had approached Damian that insinuated that he was a whore, and how it was a slight against his mother.

Danny was pretty sure Damian was ready to commit a murder when he was all finished.

He gave the pissed teen space as he moved up to a food truck in a whole line of food trucks that looked vaguely eco-goth. Sam would have had a field day in Gotham, if Danny was being honest. There was such a large eco-friendly community in Gotham.

"Carella! Hey!" Danny grinned as he approached the window, "How's business?"

"Boomin', Tommy, just boomin' and bloomin' which is exactly how I like it," A stockier person stood on the other side of the counter with an apron that said *Eat the Rich, Save the Animals* in pretty cursive. They had a bunch of studs, rings, and bars in their ears, a septum piercing, a few piercings in their purple eyebrows. Half of their head was covered in red braids, while the right portion was buzzed short.

They smacked the counter with a smirk, "What can I get you today, you rascal?"

Danny smiled, "Can I have House Wraps and two ice cream cones, please?"

"Oh? Sure, you can! You want a *Burn The House Down* ? Or just a House Wrap?" Carella asked as they moved into the truck and away from the window.

Danny hummed, "Do you like spicy food? Carella's the real deal."

Damian looked over as if to say *How dare you insult me?* "I am more than capable of appreciating the intricacies of *spice.* "

“Two House Burners, please!” Danny chirped gleefully, “And two vanilla coconuts!”

Danny sat Damian down on a park bench on the edge of Robinson Park Proper (which was apparently the 'no-go' area by civilian standards, not that Danny cared).

Damian didn’t seem to give much concern for it either.

“The ice cream is vegan, by the way,” Danny hummed as he ate his ice cream, “The entire food truck is.”

Danny didn’t mind the silence or the grumpy company. Even if Damian hadn’t been pissed as hell, and rightfully so, Danny was used to scowly, grumbly company and didn’t mind it at all.

“I’m assuming you go to school with those jerks.” Danny sighed, “I’m sorry you have to deal with them.”

“It is none of your concern,” Damian bit out, though he politely ate his food.

“Maybe not, but also you didn’t deserve that. I hope you ruin their lives,” Danny said with a teasing grin.

Damian didn’t return it.

“You hope for nothing. I will ruin their reputations as a certainty,” Danny awkwardly held eye contact with Damian as he watched a thirst for blood grow behind his expression and bleed out as his expression darkened, “They will pay dearly for their defamation.”

“Cheers, honestly,” Danny said as he ate the rest of his cone, “I love your bloodlust.”

Both of them opened up their wraps in silence, and Danny dug in with vigor. Damian, however, didn’t. He sat with a glare at Danny.

“What’s up?”

“There is meat in this,” Damian scowled.

Danny shook his head, “Nope, it’s beets. Carella, uh, stews them? I think? Cooked in some marinade or another. They showed me once when I asked,” Danny said as he took another bite of the wrap that was littered with a variety of peppers that some reviewers claimed should be illegal, but that only made Carella proud, “Their wife can’t eat meat due to medical reasons or something along those lines. They ended up going full vegan, and now they have a cool food truck.”

Danny wiped the sweat off of his face, but happily kept eating. Damian wasn’t even breaking a sweat.

He thought it was badass, honestly.

Danny grinned at Damian when he finished, “Thanks for eating lunch with me, dude. Sorry your other hang out was ruined… by me... But also? Fuck them. Listen, you deserved to not be treated like that. Take it from the guy who used to be stuffed into those super tiny half lockers that shouldn't fit anyone, you deserve better than being treated like shit by your peers.”

Damian seemed to consider his words for a moment, which is something he wasn't expecting at all, "They'll regret crossing an al Ghul. This I swear."

"Oh cool. Is that Arabic? Wow, dude, you better destroy those jerks," Danny shook his head in disgust, "What fucking insults to your nationality and culture, damn. You deserve better."

"Even if their insults were not as grave as you have made clear to me, they would still be made to pay the ultimate price," Damian snarled, though the teen beside him wasn't fazed at all by his anger.

"Oh yeah?" The blue-eyed teen asked, "Like… ultimate price how? Their lives or their livelihood?"

"Their lives would be forfeit, and they would be made a spectacle in recompense," Damian explained, "However, that is not how things are dealt with in my father's family. I respect his ways greatly."

"That's fair, I guess," The scrappy, alternative-looking teen nodded as a thoughtful expression crossed his face, though he said nothing, "Not that I'd stop you if you decided to handle things with actual murder. I think I could live with that."

A comfortable silence fell over the two of them as they finished their wraps.

"I'm Tommy, by the way," Danny grinned and offered the hand that Damian wasn't sitting next to, so the smaller teen wouldn't feel obligated to move to shake his hand.

Considering how abrasive Damian was, Danny felt honoured when the dude shook his hand.

"Damian."

“Nice to meet you.” Tommy grinned, “If you run into me again, I hope you tell me how thoroughly you destroy their lives, in a non-deadly way. But if it *is* deadly, I won’t judge you for it.”

“I return the sentiment, Thomas, so long as you are doing so in retribution and not of greed,” Damian acknowledged seriously as he squeezed the teen’s hand. It felt weirdly like a promise, and Danny was going to take it in stride.

“Okay, first of all? I don’t really kill people, not my scene, but I support you if you need to,” Tommy laughed good naturedly with genuine enjoyment in his eyes as he released Damian’s hand and held up two fingers, “Second of all, it’s not Thomas. It's Tommy.”

Danny almost laughed at Damian’s sour expression, “That is grossly casual.”

“I mean, you ate ice cream and spicy vegan wraps with a stranger,” Danny teased, “But seriously, I prefer Tommy. My name isn’t even Thomas.”

“Thomas is the correct and formal form of something so horrifying as Tommy,” Damian nodded. The fifteen-year-old took pleasure in watching Thomas’ face sour into a pout.

“Buddy, Damian, bestie,” Danny pleaded, “I promise you my name isn’t Thomas. It’s Tommy.”

“I refuse to call you something so childish,” Damian scoffed, “Tt. Especially after you went out of your way to ensure I had every courtesy I could require in taking my enemies down.”

“I really do appreciate the sentiment that I am, somehow, some way, professional?” Danny said unsurely before continuing, “But I’m just a sixteen-year-old who used to be bullied. Dude, I’ve been where you are. Kind of. Your situation is way different than mine, but it's similar enough, if you don’t mind me comparing us. Tommy is more than okay.”

Damian just scowled at him. Danny rubbed his neck awkwardly as he tried to argue being referred to as Thomas by a rich kid.

Thomas made his skin crawl the way Daniel did.

*Was Danny technically a rich kid now? Ruler of the Infinite Realms, and all that...?*

“Why consider me on that level anyways? I’m a random teen that butted in. Really, that's the epitome of an unprofessional relationship?”

“If this is your effort to sway me, then I would hate to read any persuasive essay you write,” Damian said apathetically.

“Honestly? Me too, buddy,” Danny snorted, “I failed English hard.”

“What kind of imbecile fails a class in a language he speaks?”

“Someone who was dealing with terrible bullying alongside a boatload of family issues and other stuff,” Danny shrugged carelessly, “I had no time to figure out Shakespeare or poetry. I only really excelled in science, and that’s because I’m good at that stuff.”

Danny didn’t like the frown that was simmering on his face. He gently pushed his shoulder, though the teen didn’t sway with the motion, “Look, it doesn’t really matter anymore. What matters is please don’t call me Thomas.”

“I refuse to call you something so flippant as Tommy,” Damian insisted with disgust.

“Rude,” Tommy accused teasingly with a dramatic sigh, “But I’m okay with Tom. That’s my name, as much as I prefer Tommy.”

Damian eyed Thomas suspiciously as the teen turned to face him fully instead of just turning his head, “You are simply trying to get me closer to an option that you may use to trick me into calling you such a pathetic nickname.”

“I’m really not. Hold on a second,” Thomas said as he pulled his arm into his sweater and moved around for a moment. He retrieved his wallet and popped his hand back out. He flipped the wallet open and retrieved his photo ID card, “I don’t like Tom, but it's a lot more tolerable than Thomas.”

Thomas held the card out after covering most of the information, including his last name, but his first name read as *Tom.*

“So, what do you say? Can we settle on, *ugh,* Tom?” Tom grimaced as he pulled his wallet back into his sweater.

Damian scowled, “Why bother covering your last name if you know mine?”

“Because I feel like you’re only going to call me by my last name if I do that, and I don’t want that,” Tom shamelessly admitted, “I’m not going to go around calling you al Ghul. That feels a little rude, you know? Or maybe you see it differently.”

“Rude how?” Damian demanded as his teeth grinded at the offhanded disrespect to his name.

“Well, sure, you’re an al Ghul. That’s amazing, and you should be proud of your family,” Tommy hummed, “But you’re more than just an al Ghul. That’s why you’re Damian too. I don’t know, maybe I’m just too caught up in my own head. If you want me to call you al Ghul, I will.”

Damian’s jaw slowly untensed as he looked over Tom’s body language. The older teen was being sincere.

“You may continue referring to me by Damian.”

“Awesome!” Tom smiled as he stood up and tossed his trash into the conveniently placed trash can, “See you around, I guess. I shouldn’t hold you up for much longer. You’ve got vengeance to plan.”

Damian stood with a smirk. He tossed his own garbage away before he turned and left the park.

“Goodbye, Thomas.”

“God damn it!” Tom yelled at his back, “This is revenge for keeping my last name to myself! I know it!”

# This is my emotional support sewer, and I am his emotional support sewer rat

Danny was kinda proud of himself for making a friend in his apparent age range, probably the first outside of maybe Lavender. The kids counted, but also they didn't as much as he adored them. He left the bench area with a smile.

He washed his nasty sewer clothes in the sink of the public bathroom in Robinson Park. They dried on his way across town as he made his way to a restaurant in the Alley.

Danny and Grundy had started having dinner on Tuesdays, starting a few days after Danny had met Solomon Grundy for the first time.

Well, Danny wasn't sure if Grundy knew it was Tuesday, but Danny did, and the recently-reopened Vietnamese shop down on Chester Avenue in the Bowery knew it was Tuesday. They already had his order ready when he'd walked in for the third week in a row.

Danny smiled at the owner as he passed over his payment, "Keep the change, Uncle Hien, sorry my order's kinda big. Can I have —"

"Here, Tommy," Hien chuckled. He lifted three bags that were filled to the very brim up onto the counter, "We figured you'd be back tonight. You've ordered three three-person meals every week."

Danny ignored the warmth of his cheeks as he accepted the bags with a smile, "Well, what can I say?"

"A thank you, for starters," The balding elder man teased, "Enjoy your food."

He and Grundy found a clean-ish maintenance platform and ate the food like a family on a picnic, only the blanket was grocery bags laid out so the food wouldn't touch the platform.

Towards the end of their little picnic, Danny's phone hummed in his pocket. He pulled it out with an eyebrow raised. Sam, Tucker, and Jazz never texted. It was too unsafe for them to do that.

**Lavender:** Any way you could pick Devin up from their friend's place if you're in town?

**Tommy:** Sure, like, now?

**Lavender:** Soon would be appreciated. I'm getting ready for my shift. I'm in-house tonight and can't go.

**Lavender:** But apparently we've got some frost on the windows, and I can't afford to be paying that amount of hospital bills to have Devin unfrozen because a man doesn't know how to mourn his wife and move on.

**Tommy:** I know a guy that can help with shit like that, but I can go get them, sure

**Tommy:** Just text me the address and I'll head over.

**Lavender:** If he wants to have his buddies over, you know the rules.

**Tommy:** Ike or Jesse because they're best friends and the three of them have Hood's numbers. Some minions but not a million of them

**Lavender:** Thanks Tommy

"I gotta go pick up a kid from a play date, but I'm glad we could hang," Danny said around the coconut sticky rice in his mouth.

Danny stood up with a stretch and grabbed two of the uneaten to-go containers and shoved them in one of the bags, "Go ahead and eat the rest! Have a good night! Watch out for any frost that's not me."

"Grundy not stupid," The hulking man snorted as he picked up one of the containers.

"Yeah, I know. I'm teasing," Danny turned from his place half-on the ladder and grinned, "My friend that texted me just said that there was frost on the windows, so it sounds like Mr. Freeze is starting something. Besides, my ice is kinda-sorta green. And better."

“If Freeze try something with Grundy, Freeze regret it from Arkham hospital bed,” Grundy growled.

“I can support that, for sure,” Danny winked as he headed up the ladder and off into the Gotham evening.

A cold, nippy wind gusted through the streets. Lavender was right, it was a lot colder.

His phone pinged. He headed off for Devin’s friend’s house in the Bowery.

Danny found himself standing on one of the tall but skinny houses that looked to have needed minimal repairs from the fire that had destroyed the poorer sections of Gotham. It wasn’t one of the better neighborhoods of the Bowery, but Danny recognized it as one of the once that was growing safer fairly fast with the help of Hood’s gang.

Danny thought it was ironic, but considering he was technically at the helm of his own bizarre organization, he couldn’t speak much.

Danny knocked on the door. A moment later, a pattern of knocks sounded back through the door.

“Uh, dude, you guys know I don’t want to be part of that stuff,” Danny hummed.

“Who the fuck is it?!” A kid shouted from behind the door.

Danny sighed and rubbed his forehead.

“It’s Dumpster,” Danny called back.

“... Prove it.”

Danny blinked, “Prove it? Dude, it’s Snacks, Let me in.”

The door whipped open before Danny could even finish.

Ike stood in the threshold with a deep scowl, and the poor lookout who’d been posted up at the door was shoved on the floor out of Ike’s way.

“Where the fuck have you been?! We thought you were fucking dead!” She yelled through a voice crack.

Danny blinked stupidly, “I... did say I was leaving for a bit, didn’t I?”

“Not to us,” Ike denied with a raised eyebrow.

“Lavender knew,” Danny countered, “And since she knew, I know Devin knew, which means I know you knew it too.”

He didn’t stop her when she swung a punch at his arm and didn't stop her when she threw herself against his stomach. Danny stared down at the tiny form that was hugging his waist with a scowl.

She was mad at him. They all were.

They had been worried.

He wasn't a part of their gang. Ike made that clear. He had shaken on it, agreed with it, told her *I don't want to be.*

And yet, they missed him. They *worried* . Even, knowing full well that he wandered and wouldn't be around, they were worrying about him.

Danny gently returned the hug and gently rubbed her back. He thought back to a grumpy gremlin that would forcefully occupy his bedroom and demand he play pirates even though Danny “wasn't actually” his friend.

Kids were all the same, deep down in their cores.

"You're okay," Danny said warmly. He gently combed his hand through her wild red hair, "I said I'd be gone for a while, didn't I?"

“... Yeah,” Ike grumbled from where her face was smushed in his sweater.

Danny snorted and walked inside, kicking the door behind him, “You’re gonna look so uncool, Ike.”

“Okay, but you’re Snacks. You don't look cool when someone's stuffing dino gummies into your pocket anyways,” Ike sassed, “But if you go around spreading that I have a soft side, I’ll stab you.”

“Sure, sure,” Danny nodded as she let go, “I’ve been asked to walk Devin home. Apparently, we got some frost on windows, and Lav is worried about Frosty the Snowman.”

Danny watched the kids exchange glances with each other.

He sighed.

“Raise your hand if you want me to walk you home,” Danny asked bluntly. He knew full-well that every kid in the room knew Tommy Dumpster gave no apparent fucks about entering danger zones. He watched a decent chunk of hands go up, “Raise your hand if you don’t have a home to walk to and are bunking with me for the night because you don’t have other places to stay that you know aren’t going to kill you or sell you on the black market.”

Half of the kids’ hands went up, including Ike's, though he’d already known she’d end up putting her hand up.

“You aren’t bunking with your second tonight?” Danny asked with a frown, “Lavender already gave the okay.”

“Not with most of my guys out there,” Ike shot back incredulously, “Fuck tha’ shit. If you think I’m going to sleep inside with Freeze on the streets? No.”

“Jeez, I was just asking,” Danny grumbled, “Okay, everyone who’s sticking with me tonight is going to wait here. I’ll be back after taking everyone else home,” Danny instructed casually, “Get your shit together and let’s get going. Babysitter’s here, and I don’t get paid.”

“If you’re our babysitter,” Ike sassed slyly, “Then why don’t we have your cell number?”

“Because none of you little shits ever asked me for it,” Danny sassed back as he led his first group into the twilight of the Bowery with Devin.

He dropped Devin and the people that decided they were staying over back at Lavender’s apartment last. Danny left them with the take-out and instructions to set some aside for his sister.

He doubled back and picked up the rest of the Alley Kids from their cute little meeting and took them into one of the more obscure spots in Crime Alley for the night.

If someone would have asked Ike, she would have said that Tommy looked vaguely amused, or that he was clearly having a great time.

If Sam, Tucker, or Jazz would have asked, Danny would have cackled about how hilarious it was that it looked like he had a personal guard made out of a platoon of homeless children.

He figured he would keep it to himself, though.

Danny brought his little gang to an unused and dilapidated sewer entrance that he knew for certain no gang used because it looked too risky to access.

And it was… if you were stocky, decently fed meatheads that were carrying guns.

For teeny tiny homeless kids, it was one of the safest places to be in.

It was a little caved in a maintenance shed that had been discontinued in use in favour of a newer option as part of a revitalization project, probably one of the dozens Wayne Enterprises had done and were currently doing. However, these lines exited the ground for manual access. Danny thought the design was stupid and pintless, but it was a clear left over from old times. Danny would normally say it was useless to have kept the original system.

But the pipes were heated, and Danny would wager that it just wasn't worth the expense to dig up the ground to reroute them properly.

“Tommy, you’re stupid. This spot is dangerous. Everyone not high off their ass on Venom or coke knows that,” One curly haired boy scoffed.

“Sure, if you’re an adult, maybe. Kids fit just fine,” Danny shot back cheekily. He held a hand up to catch a stray snowflake as it drifted down. He showed it off and teased, “There’s heat too. Guess I’ll keep that to myself though.”

Danny sighed dramatically as he moved through the debris carefully, so as to not disturb it and tip off anybody that might pass by. He glanced back with a shit eating grin. The cluster of kids debated quietly for a moment before they followed him into the dilapidated entrance.

He watched Ike and her cluster slowly wiggle into the space from the chilly summer evening. He figured Red Hood would be finding out about it, though, even if the bulky man couldn’t get in it. That didn’t really matter to Danny, though.

As he watched the kids post up against the warmth of the pipes, trying to act tough in spite of the underlying fear that someone who couldn’t handle death would freeze them alive instead.

Danny had long decided that Jazz would have a field day with Mr. Freeze. Apparently, his name was German, but Danny had no fucking idea.

“Is this where you stay?!” An older, lanky pre-teen with their hair pulled low into a braid asked with a barely masked excitement.

Danny let himself chuckle as he patted the fourteen-year old’s shoulder, “Nah, Veronique, Not quite. Good for a warm nap though. You guys don’t mind me still popping in now and again, do you?”

“What are you talking about, Snacks?” Ike scrunched her nose as she tossed her hair out of her face, “This is your hide.”

Danny smirked and tucked his hands in his pocket with a shrug, “Is it? Looks a lot like your hide, twerp,” He teased as he poked her in the forehead.

If he was anyone else, they'd have their ass beat into the grated concrete floor like the last guy that had called her a little boy. Ike took no disrespect of any form.

But it was Tommy, and Tommy was always the exception to the rule.

Ike raised an eyebrow, “Sewers aren’t a good place to hang in Gotham, Dumpster. That's a good way to die.”

“Eh, I’ll die in my own time,” The lanky teen leaned down with a playful grin as if he was the only one in on the joke. *As if.* All the Alley Kids knew Tommy probably didn’t want to join because of how he was sick. It was Flora who brought up how he might need to eat fairly constantly to stay semi-healthy in the first place. It made the fact that Tommy always insisted on sharing a little more… understandable. Ike would be damned before she spit in Tommy’s face over his apparent need to share, “Besides, this chunk of the sewers is pretty safe actually.”

“You literally did not just say that to me. The Sewers? Croc is in the sewers. Grundy is in the sewers. Joker’s goons traffic through them, and same with the mobsters!” Ike’s face screwed up doubt and indignation, “Maybe you aren’t as in touch with Gotham as you seem to be, Snacks.”

“Oh, definitely not, but this section of the sewers is safe. No trafficking through this section,” Danny said flippantly.

He moved into the middle of the space and whippeded around. He moved his backpack to the front of his chest and pulled out all the cans he’d tucked in his spare clothes so they wouldn’t rattle around and make noise before moving onto the more portable foods.

He set it all down on the grate with a cheeky grin, “It's not much, but it’s everything in my bag right now. Think it buys me passage through your new territory for tonight?”

“You wouldn’t have to do that if you’d just join us,” James, an older kid who wore jeans that were four sizes too big on him and a coat grumbled.

“Eh, joining gangs isn’t my thing,” Danny shrugged.

*And I definitely have no clue what that would make you guys if I did. A ruling class in Gotham? Don’t think Hood would take it well.*

*He didn’t want Hood getting pissed at him. Hood was built like a fucking tank.*

“You are basically part of the Alley Kids. You’re not that weird of an addition,” Ike shrugged.

“I’d rather be the estranged babysitter that doesn't watch his charges that closely and just swings by with fruit cups every so often, but thanks for the offer, Ike,” Danny chuckled.

“Your loss. Red Hood’s a pretty neat boss.”

Danny shrugged and kept the knowledge that he was, technically speaking, Red Hood’s unknown boss buried deep, deep in his mind.

Danny, despite not sleeping the night before, decided to be the one to stay up and watch the little rats while they slept. He got some concerned looks for it, but he and the bags under his

eyes didn't care. He was the oldest person there.

The kids could sleep. He'd sleep later.

As the first batch of kids woke up, Danny left the warmth of the maintenance shack and stepped out into a grimy Gotham alley that was dusted with snow.

After catching the news in a gas station as he picked up some food for himself, Danny learned a few things.

The Bats failed to catch Killer Waylon.

Waylon had been pissed.

Waylon dealt with his anger by picking a fight with a sad, frosty man and then beating the shit out of him.

Danny awkwardly paid for his couple of items and headed straight for the closet supercenter store he could find. He went through the aisles and made Waylon a little care package that included (among other things) toothbrushes, nail brushes, tubes of toothpaste, boxes of baking soda, and three pre-cooked rotisserie chickens alongside a little apology note.

*Dear Killer Waylon,*

*Your teeth are scary, but mouth rot sucks. I have no idea if your teeth regrow, but someone with chompers like yours deserves better mouth care. Also enjoy the chicken. I know some*

*great barbecue recipes, but, alas, no barbecue or anything to do that. We should get together sometime and do something over a fire.*

*Sorry about the Bat thing. If I would've known he was there, I would have gladly fought you in the sewer instead. That being said, I'd love to throw down with you if you're interested. Grundy never wants to wrestle with me, and I miss it.*

*Sorry I left so suddenly. Blame the furry in the vigilante costume,*

*Tommy Kingdan, Grundy's "Pest"*

Danny walked through the softly shining city that was covered in gentle crystals of ice and snow, but quickly gave way to the heat of the Gotham summer morning.

With a kid's backpack full of Waylon's stuff, Danny couldn't help but swing by Robinson Park to, like many other kids, make a little snowman on his way to the reservoir in the center of the park..

He gently froze the creation and gave him two greenish ice eyes and a warm smile of ice pebbles. Danny couldn't help the exuberant smile that spread across his face in return as he looked at the little shimmering snowman that was small enough to fit in his hand and made of just two snowballs.

The green tinge of the snow was only visible if Danny really squinted to look for it, but that was perfect. He set the small guy down among a field of all kinds of snowmen and wandered deep into the park where the drainage system flowed into Gotham's Reservoir.

He clambered inside with a dark green children's backpack with little crocodile cartoons all over it that he picked out from the children's school supply section of the store. Danny made

his way into the tunnels that he knew for certain that Grundy didn't go. He spent a while wandering until he found walls littered with scratch marks.

He left the bag sitting on a platform deep into Waylon's territory that appeared to have been somewhat lived on and vanished, leaving behind a care package kept warm with some heat packets squished in around the chickens.

In a bush next to the Reservoir's opening, a note was carefully tied to the stalk of a bush that was already curling in around the note.

*Dear Dr. Isley,*

*I'm really sorry about the frost and snow. Technically speaking, that might be my fault? I don't know if the weather would have gotten as chilly if I didn't accidentally get Mr. Croc targeted by the residential furries of the night.*

*If any of your plants got damaged or hurt by the frost, I'd be happy to do what I can to make up for it.*

*Again, I'm really sorry,*

*Tommy Kingdan (That kid that cried on your plants)*

# Comradery in co-misery and the mysteries of learning that which you have in common

Duke had a long night.

Mr. Freeze had been in the middle of whatever plot he'd had in order to gain some new cryo-tech from STAR Labs that wholly didn't interest Duke at all, but he'd been called in to help with the take down and the damage after.

The tech that Freeze had been after was cool as fuck, but what was cooler than the coldest technology in the United States?

Sleeping before his 6:30am patrol.

Which, Duke noted as he swung his way through the city, was something that did not happen. At all. Not even a fucking nap. It was fine.

It was.

The fact that his foster family never remembered that Duke had to be an early riser didn't grate on his nerves, and the fact that he'd basically been flash frozen at three in the goddamn morning because he was barely awake also didn't bother him.

Duke took a deep breath as he released his line and soared through the early morning snow glow over Central Gotham and re-routed himself towards Robinson Park.

The site of children both big and small crowding around with their parents and friends made Duke's irritation ease up just a little bit. There were different outposts crafted from the snow where children were hard at work creating and throwing snowballs out each other. Friends and families were working together to roll out large snow people and add them to a weird little snow-village that was quickly growing in the middle of the park.

Duke’s eyes gazed over the little village with a smile.

He paused as he caught something in the middle of all the snowy fun and re-routed again. He took his line in and shot his grapple at a streetlamp to reroute into the middle of the park.

One of the snow people was positively glowing, and not in the way snow normally glittered under sunlight.

No.

Duke released his line mid swing over the snowball battlefield filled with children and landed graciously in the middle of the snow people. He moved past the army of snowballs stacked on top of each other with smiles of sticks and stones in classic Gotham fashion, and towards the source of the weirdly warm greenish glow.

It was bizarre. The snowmen almost looked like they were guarding the source of the shine the way Duke walked past the legion that was staring mostly forwards.

Duke slowed down as he broke into a weirdly placed circle of snowmen that stood beside the smallest snowman in the field.

He could tell which snowmen were already standing in the area before the glowing addition. They were all facing in generally the same area that most of the legion was. The light around them was older too. The newer additions, both big and small, were turned very obviously towards the tiny snowman in the center.

Duke walked forward and crouched down in front of the little guy that could fit so neatly in his hands

There were two snowballs stuck together, with the body being bigger than the head. The weird snow that made up the snowman shone like soft balls of green light. The eyes were made of a much brighter green light and looked like they were made of pure emerald crystals. The smile, like the eyes, was made of the same glittering green crystals. They stretched across the little snow-buddy's face and twinkled like the brightest of constellations.

Duke gently scooped the little guy up into his hands.

As Duke kneeled in the middle of the circle of snow people, holding the tiniest little snow-buddy in his hand, he could feel the fluttering shine of joy from the softly glowing light. A bright and beautiful sense of wonder shone warmly from the deep, glacial eyes.

“For something so small, you sure do glow like a star,” Duke said with a soft, warm smile.

Duke tugged a glove off and let his fingers trace the crystals. A weird tremor ran down his spine. It was cold, but not in the way Duke had expected the snow-buddy to be. His own hands didn’t really grow cold, and the weird ice didn’t feel like it was melting beneath the heat of his hand at all. He set a careful hand on the little buddy’s head and waited, but it didn’t melt at all. If anything, it was both the coldest he’d ever felt something to be, and not cold at all. It felt like it was merely an impression of cold, a phantom chill. The sensation was fascinating, and Duke was sure that no one else but him would be able to appreciate it thanks to his ability.

Duke set the little buddy back down in the snow and slid his glove back on. He carefully shot a line to make an exit from Robinson Park. He stood up and turned away as the line made purchase on a law firm.

An ache of irrational sadness throbbed in his chest at the thought of leaving the little guy here. No one would ever see it as he would. No one could ever feel the joy that the little guy offered to his surroundings on the same level as Duke could, even though the population of snow people was thicker near the tiny snowman.

Duke turned and scooped the little buddy back off the ground before he zipped out of the park to complete his patrol.

Despite being held in a cradle for the rest of Signal's patrol, the little snowman wasn't melted or damaged in any way and was still brightly shining with light and love.

Duke set the lil' buddy down on his nightstand and fell asleep, confident that the snowman would still be there when he woke up at dinner time.

When Duke opened his eyes for the final time as the alarm Alfred made him set so he would remember to wake up to eat dinner screamed in his ear, visions of a mischievous, white-haired boy with glittering green eyes and electric laughter echoed through his mind.

His eyes focused on his little snow pal, still sitting in perfect condition on his nightstand.

He smiled and crawled out of bed with the encouraging smile egging him on to get up and wear pajamas to dinner, and watch Alfred give disapproving stares to his foster dad for asking Duke to help them.

Okay. The snowman wasn't doing that, but, in his heart of hearts, Duke figured the boy from his dream would support his pettiness, and considering how vivid the dream was, he was almost certain the boy he saw was the same one who made the snowman.

Duke changed into the comfiest pajamas in his wardrobe and threw on his huge yellow sweater before he turned to the snowman with a little spin.

"What do you think, buddy? Think they'll let me nap on the couch if I go like this and fall asleep in Alfred's gnocchi?" Duke asked. Nothing actually changed about the glittering, joyous expression, but the meta nodded all the same, "Uh-huh, yeah, I agree, yeah, same here. Alright. Perfect."

Duke decided.

He shoved his feet into his sneakers and snagged his phone, charger, and wallet from the nightstand before he took a picture of his new friend and left the apartment.

He hailed a cab for Wayne Manor, and as he sat, slouched in the back of the cab, he charged the ride to Bruce's credit card and set the lock screen on his phone to the hopeful, joyful face of his little snow buddy.

Danny sandwiched himself behind a decently clean, and fairly cozy cluster of dumpsters behind a business complex. Danny shuffled until his body was squished snugly half inside the bricks and pressed against the chilled metal. He pressed his forehead to the peeling green paint of the rusted dumpster with a soft sigh. The exhaustion he'd carried through the day pulled at his bones. He pulled the two-way from his pocket to fiddle with the buttons as he tried to convince his body to crash.

He fiddled quietly and was half asleep when a soft chime came from the walkie-talkie.

"Solomon Grundy…"

Dany gave a tired grin as he pressed the button to respond, "Sorry big guy, I don't have the energy to come play today. I babysat some kids last night… If you see them hanging around in the abandoned maintenance tunnel, it's because I showed them."

Danny's quiet murmurs trailed off with a yawn. He shifted his arm to act as both a pillow and leverage in case he had to pull himself free quickly. The exhaustion pulled harder as the small space grew comfortable.

An acknowledging grunt came from the two-way, and Danny chuckled.

“The kids are cute. Tough little shits too, you can’t miss ‘em, promise. It’s that tunnel that’s too close to an entrance to the sewers that you don't really like going near…”

Danny trailed off, though after a while he could hear Grundy mumble his rhyme.

He turned the volume to its minimum setting as his heart picked up speed as a flood of anxiety washed him to sleep.

*How many times had he fallen asleep on a call with Tucker and Sam? How many times had he missed? How many times would he miss?*

*He missed Tucker’s snoring…*

“Solomon Grundy… Born on a Mond-y…”

“Whatcha got there, Damian?” Duke asked as he passed Damian’s room, and tiredly stuck his head in upon seeing a bunch of papers strewn about the floor.

“My revenge, Thomas,” Damian answered amicably as he set another pile of papers among the masses of documents among the carpeted floor.

“What is my duty of care in this situation?” Duke murmured to himself softly.

He looked around the room with a sigh only to pause as Damian’s past light trails showed an expression of rage that Duke hadn’t seen in a long time as he pounded at the keys of his

computer. He blinked and looked back to where Damian was kneeling on the floor sorting through papers.

Duke stepped inside the youngest Wayne's room and shut the door behind him.

"Leave my room this instant, Thomas," Damian glared.

"What's going on Damian?" Duke asked as he walked into the room and sat in a free spot among the papers but outside of arm's reach, "Nothing's gotten to you like this in… damn, I really can't remember. That Christmas Charity Gala last year, I'd wager."

"It is none of your concern."

"You're planning revenge," Duke pointed out as he watched Damian staple two separate piles together by some arbitrary sorting method, though, with Damian, nothing was arbitrary, "What's going on?"

"You will not be stopping this course of action, Thomas, and it is best to drop your pathetic attempts to stop me before you land yourself on this list as well," Damian growled.

"If it's for a good reason, I'm not going to stop you. I know better than to piss off the assassin in my house."

Duke didn't know what it was about his statement that got the Demon's attention, but the glare changed into something less accusatory and more assessing.

Damian's expression puckered into a sour frown.

"... You tell no one what I am going to tell you," The fifteen-year-old demanded.

“Deal,” Duke agreed without hesitating.

“It has come to my… *attention* ,” Damian said with a reluctant snarl, “That my so-called peers are making a greater fool of me than I thought. Grayson’s pushing for me to make friends has left me little more than a public spectacle for their ridicule.”

Duke felt his heart sink in his chest as he furrowed his brow, “You’re being bullied?”

“Tt. As much as I despise that word, Thomas, I have never *ceased* being bullied,” Damian scoffed, “However, I was woefully unaware of how deep the slander went. The disgrace ends today, Thomas.”

Damian gracefully gestured to the piles around him. Duke picked up one of the many face down piles nearby and skimmed the first page.

“Grayson banned me from hacking my peers' private information, but I have elected to ignore his rule based on new information that someone brought to me today.”

He checked a different pile.

“They will pay for their disrespect,” Damian declared darkly, “I will tear their lives apart, and damn be to Grayson’s pathetic rules.”

And another.

Duke’s hands gripped the paper harshly as he read line after line, calmly and neatly annotated by Daman as if he had cross-referenced the content. Knowing Damian, he probably had, but some of the comments were in quotation marks and used language Damian surely wouldn’t.

*“Shit like this? Coward behaviour.”*

*"I have zero clue what religion they're trying to insult, but they're referencing a bunch when they shit on you, and all of that is horrible."*

*"Believe me when I say none of these compliments are any sort of real."*

*"I bet they talk shit in their DMs (Direct Messages)."*

*"Bestie, they're calling you and your mom fucking whores, and saying you slept your way into the US."*

*"Who fucking comes to an establishment hours ahead just to make sure they use up all the dairy alternatives?!"*

"Damian, how long have you been listening to crap like this?" Duke asked through clenched teeth.

He stared at piles of proof of just how far the bullying of his youngest brother went, of the racist actions and remarks that went into every interaction Damian seemed to have, all neatly printed out for him to rightfully plot over. Screenshots from hacking the group chats of kids Duke only loosely knew about as people in Damian's class or from being in the Rich Folks Circles that he was stuck learning about were laid out, undeniably discussing horribly discriminating things regarding Damian.

"Since the very beginning, and now that the playing field has been leveled, I am ending this charade of a game. Grayson's puppy eyes be damned."

Duke set the piles down and looked Damian in the eyes, "I know what this shit's like. How can I help?"

"Keep Grayson and Father from stopping my revenge," Damian said seriously.

“Dick would be a big help. He’s listed as one of your guardians. If you don’t want Bruce involved, you could ruin these fuckers’ social reputations and have Dick go to the school about your bullying,” The daytime hero suggested.

“Grayson would not understand,” Damian denied.

“From what I remember, he totally would. Dick got ripped to shreds for being a nomadic circus freak by Gotham High Society. Honestly, I think everyone in the Waynes was ridiculed for one thing or another.”

Damian was silent for a moment, “I’ll consider it if you keep everyone out of my way tonight.”

# The prodigal failures of your father's hopes and dreams will haunt him if they let him, but the haunting of his denial is louder than love lost in the interim

Duke had been looking forward to amping up the act of looking pathetic and tired so the Bats would feel bad for bugging him at night. He just thought that meant he'd be acting pathetic in the parlor.

The fact that he got to act pathetic in the Bat Cave?

Amazing.

Duke made his way down the Cave's stairway, carefully untying one of his shoe laces. He tugged his sweater to the one side as if he'd given up on getting it to sit right, and channeled the exhaustion he'd felt before his nap.

He let himself sway down the stairs, slowly acting less and less tired in favour of actually feeling that bone deep exhaustion.

"Hi's it goin'?" Duke murmured as he stumbled onto the main platform as if he overestimated the number of steps.

"... Duke? You okay, dude?" Tim paused from his place sparing with Cass as he watched his foster brother stumble down the stairs. He never tripped on stairs. Ever.

Duke looked over through eyes that pulled down more than Tim's and gave a smile and a thumbs up.

Cass made a frown that told Tim, even though he didn't need her input, that Duke was not, in fact, okay.

On the contrary.

Duke was currently shitting his pants.

He thought Cass was spending the week at Barbara's. The fact that he had to sell it in front of Cass, well…

Damian needed space to do what he had to do, and Duke wanted to see those jerks go down hard.

The daytime hero shuffled over to the computer where Bruce was sitting and stared as if he couldn't fathom Bruce there. A minute of awkward staring went by before Duke spoke.

"I gotta write the report on the snowmen in Robinson park," Duke murmured and looked at Bruce through half-closed eyes, " 'S the only inter'sting thing I saw."

"Duke, buddy, I think you need to go to bed…" Bruce attempted to redirect his foster son away from the computer, but Duke clearly saw him coming and managed to duck away.

"Noooooooo," Duke whined, "You get mad when reports aren't reported in the first twenty-four hours!"

Tim blinked as he listened to the low whine coming from Duke. He never whined. He gave sarcastic complaints, but he didn't ever throw a fit about things.

"I promise I won't be mad," Bruce coaxed gently. The long whine from Duke kept coming as he dodged Bruce's gentle grasp.

"You're lyiiiinnnnnng…"

Right before Duke fell, he could see it play out.

*Bruce would move the chair he had been sitting in to try and encourage Duke to sit before he could hurt himself.*

*His shoelace would wrap itself in the wheel and would trip Duke for real.*

*Bruce would try and catch him. It would make things worse. Duke would slam his head on the corner edge of the computer desk.*

*Blood everywhere.*

*The Bats would try to coral him in the med bay and would fail miserably as they tried to be gentle with Duke and his concussion.*

It was stupid. He could avoid it easily. He wasn't that tired.

*But…*

Damian needed more time than what he'd be otherwise able to pull off with Cass around.

It was crazy enough to work.

Bruce moved the chair. Duke felt a snag, and let the chaos reign.

Maybe after this, they'd learn to let him sleep at night.

Damian wasted no time in stuffing the files he'd created into a briefcase, grabbed his League clothes from his closet, dressed quickly, and vanished out of the window secure in the knowledge that Duke would either keep the occupants of the Cave from noticing his absence or would suffer the consequences.

This would be the first time putting his faith fully in Richard's philosophy of brotherhood.

If Duke butchered Damian's sole request, it would be the last.

Damian wasted no time as he dashed across the city with no comms, trackers, or phones. No technology other than the grapple gun he used to trapeze through Gotham quickly meant no risk of being tracked. Gordon would be watching, but not for him.

This was for his benefit because Damian headed straight for the place Father banned him from going alone.

Crime Alley.

Damian had considered Duke's suggestion of requesting Dick's assistance with enforcing a punishment of Damian's prosecutors, but truthfully there was only one person Damian trusted enough to ask for assistance in ruining their lives: Jason Todd, Father's most hated and most beloved child.

Damian's boots hit the rooftop of a new apartment within the Alley.

Somehow, Damian noted as his old League issue boots padded silently across the shadowed rooftops, the new buildings of the Alley could only be discerned from the old ones based on

structure, not appearance. The filth of the surrounding building and roads had already coalesced over the clean bricks, tainting them with the stain of Parks Row.

Fitting, for the home of Father's prodigal reject.

Todd, however, was arguably the one that could understand Damian the best, the one son who could understand Damian's failures. They were different, to be sure, but Damian saw himself in Jason in ways he didn't with Richard despite never being allowed to interact with him.

That being the case, Damian absorbed everything they knew about Todd's patrol routes, check-ins, common stops, and whatever other thing that was likely to be used to stalk the family crime lord.

As Damian vaulted onto the next roof with a slight smirk on his face, it occurred to him that his forethought of adding false patrols to Red Hood's file in the Bat Cave was about to benefit him greatly.

The slight whisper of crunching debris was all the warning Damian had needed to alter his forward momentum and flip over the incoming body as Red Hood darted from the shadows.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Jason growled as he turned to face the short-statured assassin, "I made it very fucking clear that the League was to stay away from Gotham. Why are you here, and what is in the briefcase."

Damian landed carefully and extracted himself from grabbing range quickly, he took a place onto the roof's ledge and pulled his hood and facemask down, leaving only his Robin domino that had long since been stripped of tracking devices and hidden within his league robes.

The smirk was gone from his face, leaving only his usual scowl.

Jason kept his hand on his pistol, "Little far from the nest, aren't ya, Baby Bat, and in a League uniform, no less."

“I wished to speak with you,” Damian said neutrally.

Jason waited for the brat to continue or shoot out an insult, but he didn’t, so Jason scoffed, “Daddy Bats banned you birds from coming near me after the last one almost bit the dust in my presence.”

“I am aware,” Damian said with a deeper, bitter scowl as he thought over his grounding, “He was not pleased when I was in your vicinity last we met.”

Jason snorted as he leaned back casually with his hands in his belt, though they both knew that he was by no means defenseless or disadvantaged by the relaxed posture, “You got grounded, did you? B’s a fucking hypocrite. Don’t take it personally.”

“I am aware Father is a hypocrite,” Damian said carefully. Jason zeroed in on the hesitance tinting his voice, “And I must take it personally. That is a different conversation.”

“Oh? And what’s the conversation you want to have?” Jason tilted his head as he listened with a growing curiosity.

“A request,” Damian admitted openly, “A *personal* one.”

“Go ask Dickwing,” Jason dismissed with a wave of his hand as if he was shooing a cat, “I’m really not the family matters type of person.”

“I do not wish to speak of private affairs in an open, unsecure area. However,” Damian grit his teeth, “I am uncomfortable with Father or Nightwing’s assistance. Signal’s help is… appreciated, but he is allowing me to speak with you. Unnoticed.”

“Not comfortable telling Golden Boy?” Jason asked intrigued. He chuckled and waved Damian to follow, “This explains the League get-up. Surprised B didn’t confiscate it.”

“Agent A would not let him,” Damian admitted softly.

“Agent A is the best one in the house,” Jason agreed as he shot a line and swung. He didn’t have to look to see if the brat-sassin was following him.

The clink of the line snagging a building told him Damian was following.

The League outfit told him that he was being truthful.

The hesitance told him just how hard of a time the sure-footed demon was having reaching out.

The phantom ache of Dick never listening to his own problems told him to reach back.

“Talk.”

The apartment Jason brought Damian back to was homey, but more because he bought it for shits, giggles, and because it was slightly closer to the airport for Roy to arrive and crash after flights.

Jason shoved the fifteen year old onto the large sofa and sat back next to him. He fiddled with the buttons on his helmet before prying it off and tossing the booby trapped device onto the lazy boy nearby.

Damian reluctantly set the briefcase on Jason's coffee table, "I am having some… trouble. With peers."

"You're… being bullied," Jason acknowledged a little flatly.

A disgusted look crossed over Damian's face.

"It has been pointed out that this has passed bullying and is discrimination, racism, libel, and slander," Damian corrected, "Grayson was aware I did not get along with my peers, and insisted I continue trying. I have been trying for years. Things are… worse, and getting worse. I am not comfortable with going to Grayson as Thomas suggested, but he is my secondary guardian with the school. I refuse to go to Father about this."

"And why's that?" Jason asked as he slung his arm over the back of the couch and propped his head up to listen.

"Father would never be grateful I have yet to kill the majority of my classmates."

" 'Scuse me?" Jason asked with a concerned expression.

Damian opened the briefcase and pushed it towards Jason, "Their behaviour and actions would have resulted in their deaths if I were still in the League, as well as torture. Father would tell me to be the bigger person. I have been the bigger person for years. Recently, an… acquaintance explained the social and lingual context I had been missing, and their actions were worse than I had anticipated. The behaviour is worsening, and it is spreading through the school."

Jason looked at the pinched, upset expression on Damian's face. To anyone else, it probably looked like annoyance, but Jason had been in the league for years. He never really interacted with Damian, but he had seen him. It was difficult not to, especially at official functions within the League.

Damian had no idea one of Talia's personal squads was, legally speaking, his dead older brother, and that was fine by Jason.

As much as Jason wanted no part in the family drama (mainly surrounding him), Damian was a fifteen year old assassin who could handle himself in any number of combat and hostile scenarios, but bullying was the one thing Talia really hadn't prepared the kid for. Even parents who prepared their kid to deal with bullies never truly prepared their kids.

Cruelty evoked cruelty, and Bruce could count his lucky fucking stars his youngest had so much restraint.

Jason leaned forward and slid the briefcase into his lap. He mindlessly turned his TV on and tossed the remote to Damian, "What whatever you wanna watch. I'm going to read this, and then after we're going to talk about it."

"I wish to ruin them," Damian returned as he put on an animal documentary about cassowaries.

Jason flicked his eyes over to Damian and smirked, "Oh, I think we can make that happen. No one insults the Prince, after all."

Damian barely kept his brows from furrowing at the teasing as he watched Jason's face stay carefully open as he read through the many items contained in the briefcase ranging from hacked screenshots of texts and direct messages (DMs, as Tom had disgustingly shortened it to) on various social medias to meticulously documented encounters Damian had apparently had at school and outside of school.

Over all of it, the Demon had meticulously made notes in red pen as he commented on the text in speech patterns that clearly weren't his own, going as far as to add in slang that Damian wouldn't touch with a ten foot pole. The idea that Damian would ever say some of these phrases made Jason hold in a chuckle or two as he read, though he kept the amused expression firmly locked away.

Trust was lost and never gained back for someone in the League. If Jason fucked it up, he'd never have it again. He didn't really care so much for the close relationship, Dick could keep the title of Damian's favourite, but the idea that Jason represented help Dick couldn't give was… appealing.

If Jason had someone like that when he was younger, shit would have ended differently.

He dismissed the thought that crept up and returned to reading.

A line within the painstaking notation in quotation marks caught his eyes.

*"I know I get looks for being nice, so listen to me when I tell you this shit: They aren't. Nothing they do is being nice."*

Jason started over from the beginning and re-read every red notation he could find. A few of them stood out among the rest

*"I think the only reason they haven't started wailing on you yet is because that kind of bullying is easier to prove. Or not, if you lived in an area like I did, but I left for reasons other than bullying."*

*"I see a lot of shit, and, while I don't encourage violence, I think I wouldn't be sad if you destroyed them. Their reputations. Same thing, as I understand it, in the private school circuit."*

*"There's nothing wrong with being a prostitute, but these comments are disgusting. Even if you get around a lot, it doesn't make you a whore or a slut. The prostitutes are some of the coolest people. They're missing out."*

Damian knew Snacks.

*Interesting.*

Damian would never confide in a stranger.

No.

Tommy had *seen* something go down between Damian and his bullies and had intervened.

Jason kept the little smile to himself, but the knowledge that Damian had someone that would keep an eye out for him soothed a bit of his anger. Not much, but enough.

The contents of the actual files, however, were scratching at Jason's sense of injustice with the racist attacks documented in the briefcase. The online ones were worse, having taken full advantage of Damian not having an online presence to run their defamatory, derogatory, racist smear campaign about Damian Wayne.

"Alright, kiddo," Jason said an hour later as he looked over to where Damian was sitting with crossed legs, watching the freaky-yet-cool bird documentary, "What do you need me to do?"

Damian looked over with his emerald eyes. Jason wasn't sure when he had removed the domino, "As I said, I wish to destroy them."

Jason smirked, "And I'm down to help you do that. These assholes picked the wrong battle. What do you *need me to do* to help you enact your revenge plan?" Jason asked as he tapped Damian's detailed outline of desired consequences.

"I discussed this with Thomas. He doesn't think Father would approve of any of this, my plans," Damian scowled, "I agree. I… ask that you enact this for me."

Jason raised an eyebrow as he leafed through the plan again. A list of names and descriptions of what was waiting for them in their lives to look forward to and ways to utterly ruin their

futures was meticulously typed out. Avenues of destruction listed in order of convenience and cross-referenced with the ways to inflict the most damage to reputations and livelihoods.

Just his kind of document, if Jason was being honest.

“I think I can do that for you,” Jason said playfully, “Did you want this briefcase back, or can I keep it?”

“Keep it. Should Alfred, Father, or Grayson discover it, I will be in trouble.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want that,” Jason snorted as he shut the briefcase.

“Father is already that angry that I demanded he tell me in advance if I require to move from the manor,” Damian said as he applied his domino and stood to leave.

“Why?” Jason asked as he put his helmet back on.

“Because my hands are bloodier than yours, and yet you are the murderer of the family,” Damian said as he perched on the window sill. He shot a line into the night and looked back before he vanished, “It is unfair, and I deserve to know if Father will abandon me next after insisting repeatedly that we are all family.”

Jason brought the briefcase to his room and kicked it under the bed. He vanished through the window of the apartment a minute after Damian did. He wasn’t surprised when Damian was long gone.

The night was quiet as Jason began his hunt to destroy Damian’s enemies beneath the cover of the streetlights' under-glow that reigned shadow above.

As he and Damian ran across the rooftops in different areas of the city, Gotham plunged into pure darkness with only a horrible, guttural, inhuman sound.

# Boiling tempers, late night swimming, and a sweet tooth all somehow, someway, relate back to shrimp

Chapter Notes

Season's Greasons

Danny woke up like he was crawling free from sludge. It was tough and tiring, but he wiggled free from where he'd wedged himself anyways. The sky above was quickly fading with the evening twilight. Danny couldn't bring himself to give a fuck about sleeping all day.

He'd been comfortable, sue him.

He walked from the alcove with a smile. Danny stretched out his back with a relieved sigh as the late morning Gotham rush bustled around, as limited as it was in that area of town. Danny didn't mind.

Danny made sure all the contents of his pockets were safe, sound, and accounted for he ventured out of the dead-end alley. He kept his hands in his pockets and his head facing forwards and slightly downturned, avoiding everyone's eyes as he moved through the grungier streets.

He wandered for a few hours before he found himself picking out tea from a little obscure shop and walking out before he could even register that he'd bought it thinking of Ivy. It was a house mix, apparently the owner's favourite flavours. He'd bought it on an impulse, but it was nice to support a reopened business.

She reminded him of Sam, but if she was older like Ida.

He just hoped Miss Pamela wasn't allergic to pomelo or any of the flowers in the tea.

Danny took a marker and drew a little smiley face on the recycled paper bag as he maneuvered through the already-melted streets of Gotham.

He swung by the bush he'd tied the note in previously to check if it had vanished.  It was long gone, but there was a little flower in its place. Danny grinned and carefully set the bag carefully in the branches.

*It reminded me of you, but I don't know if you like tea :)*

He vanished into the Reservoir's sewer opening as he prepared for another night awake because he'd forgotten to set an alarm to wake himself up.

"Not that Clockwork would throw me a bone," Danny chuckled as he drifted above the water. He switched the soles of his shoes over the water's surface with a grin, "But don't worry about it, Clockwork! It was nice to sleep in for once."

There was no answer from the Master of Time, not that Danny was expecting one.

He stretched as he flopped over in the air, papping his feet against the water as he floated backwards through the tunnels and played around on his phone. No one texted and walked in the bad parts of town. It was a good way to get yourself cornered, but Danny missed being able to do it, but also didn't want to deal with the rush of downtown.

So, sewers.

Danny was realizing that was his go-to way of dealing with shit lately.

**Tommy:** Did the gremlins save you some dinner

**Lavender:** Yeah, actually

**Lavender:** Amazing

**Lavender:** Thanks for that, by the way

**Tommy:** No problem, as long as you paint my nails again

**Lavender:** Pfft, deal

**Lavender:** But you'll probably have to come hang with the girls for that. Business is picking up. People are getting their legs back under them, and it's been stressful, so they're spending

**Lavender:** Good news for me though

**Tommy:** Fuck yeah, love the girls.

**Tommy:** Boss Lady Matilda is fucking scary though

**Lavender:** She'd cut a bitch's throat in a second tbh. Wouldn't change her for the world

**Tommy:** Fair enough. I can stand a boss supporting their workers

**Tommy:** If I ever see her cut someone's throat, no I didn't

Danny laughed to himself as he drifted around the corner and around some awkwardly placed plumbing as he talked bullshit with Lavender.

**Lavender:** Look, all I'm saying is that of Johns are allowed to rip the skirts off, they should be free

**Tommy:** I'm sure I can steal some nice skirts for you bestie

**Lavender:** The fucking idea of you being arrested with skirts from Gotham's high fashion line is hilarious but please don't

**Lavender:** Dev's upset that you didn't come back before. Don't get arrested lol

**Tommy:** I get that but also 'm not getting scooped by cps. I'm old enough to live how I want to

**Lavender:** You live like a trash goblin

**Tommy:** I feel so understood <3

Danny snickered as he smacked the flat sole of his sneaker against the water and listened to the echo bounce around him as he wandered into Grundy's territory. Every so often, he smacked his foot on the wall as he turned, and only paused his fidgeting when the wall made a weird sound.

“If I stick my head through, and there’s a fucking body, I’m going to scream,” Danny snorted as he stuck his arm through. He waved it around in the empty space and found nothing.

He pursed his lips and stuck his head through the bricks of the wall.

On the other side of the thick brick wall was nothing.

Pitch black.

Danny fumbled for his phone, turned on the flashlight, and phased it through the wall.

Piles of abandoned and broken bricks buried under debris sat in a tiny alcove with different bricks and patterned flooring.

A little junction had been filled in by whatever sewer maintenance team who had lazily, or hurriedly, walled the last section off instead of filling it in completely despite the thick wall that walled the section off. All that was left was a little closet sized space, just big enough for Danny to put his arms out and touch each of the walls.

A wide smile crossed Danny's face as he pulled his upper half out of the wall and let himself land on his feet on the little ledge along the side of the tunnel. He pulled up the note in his phone and highlighted the maintenance tunnel within Grundy’s territory that he was currently in.

**Danny:** Just found the perfect place to hide a dead body.

**Danny:** Unconvinced that wasn’t what this place was meant to do

**Danny:** They clearly forgot the body if that’s the case

**Jazz:** Excuse me?

**Danny:** Yeah!

**Danny:** I guess the neighborhood above had a remodel, and they re-did the sewers below, but got lazy

**Danny:** Now I'm going to use it to be lazy

**Tucker:** I for sure thought you were going to say "To hide a dead body."

**Tucker:** Currently ecstatic that I don't have to digitally cover up crime right now.

**Sam:** But he would. He's cried on me about it.

**Tucker:** You make me sound so uncool.

**Sam:** You were cool?

**Sam:** Wow, someone should have told me.

**Jazz:** Don't listen to her, Tuck. I think you're super cool!

**Tucker:** Oh god.

**Tucker:** I'm uncool.

Danny stood there snickering quietly as he watched Tucker devolve into a panic over Jazz thinking he was cool.

The sound of sloshing filled the tunnel. Large shoulders cast deep shadows over Danny as the teen turned with a huge smile. The scruffy teen shot off a text, teasing Tucker quickly before he turned to say hello to his friend.

Cheery blue eyes didn't meet red, but his smile didn't fall at the sight of yellow eyes.

"Hey!" Danny beamed at the sight of green scutes and razor teeth that grinned down at him from above, "Sorry about last time."

Waylon's under-eyelid swiped across his golden eyes as a deep, raspy chuckle bellowed from his underbelly, "What? Did ya tattle to Batman?"

"Well, no, but I still feel bad," Danny shrugged as he shoved his hands in his pockets.

The massive man leaned down and tilted his head.

“Then don’t bother beggin’ a pardon, Shrimp,” Waylon smirked.

“Mmm, shrimp,” Danny hummed, “We should get some sometime.”

“Aren’t you *precious* ?” The meta sassed, “If you get the shrimp, we’ll do a boil, if that’s what yer fixin’ to do. If I go get the shrimp, you can bet your scrawny ass that the Bats will be taking a place at the dinner table.”

“Really?! Oh, man, I miss my friend’s barbecues. I’d just about *die* for a boil,” Danny snickered, “Yeah, dude, let’s do a fucking boil sometime. I’ll *pick up* all the shit for it,” The scrawny teen said flippantly as he tilted his hand back and forth, as if picking up the shrimp was a relative term, “But no Bats. I don’t know how I feel about them.”

“Batman saved you from getting beat to shit, and you don’t know if you like him?” Waylon growled through his teeth, “That’s fuckin’ hilarious. He loves strays like you.”

“I really don’t think he’d like me much, actually,” Danny shrugged impishly.

“Oh, yeah. You’re a strong little shit, ain’t ya?” Killer Waylon hummed as he scratched his chest, “Big Bat’s not a fan of metas.”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured,” Dany scowled, “And I’m not a meta.”

“Right, right, you’re Grundy’s little shit,” Croc snorted dismissively as he watched a pout cross the brat’s face.

“I’m not-” Danny protested indignantly, only to be cut off by a massive hand covering his mouth.

“I don’t wanna know how one of you comes around, so you shut the fuck up right now,” Waylon smirked, “I don’t fucking even wanna think about who could have possibly been your mama, and I certainly don't wanna think about any deed needed to make one o’ ya.”

“I mean, whatever you’re thinking, it’s probably worse? Maybe,” Danny snarked through the hand.

“You still cruisin’ for a bruisin’, huh? Keep talking, then, ya shit-kicker,” Waylon smirked. He pushed the kid’s head back and watched the little shit take a couple of wobbly steps to catch himself, but was otherwise unfazed.

“You wanna fight? Really?!” Danny perked up and grinned.

“You offered, Pest,” The deep southern drawl seemed to ripple darkly along the sewer walls, but Danny just grinned back at the rows of daggers.

“ *Yes!* ” Danny shouted as he pumped his fist in the air, “George of the urban jungle can’t swing fast enough to catch these hands this time. You wanna take this to a junction?”

Danny’s disjointedly excited cheer echoed across the grimey water of the sewers

“Sure, why not? I’ll even go easy on ya. For now,” Waylon poked the teen in the forehead with a sharp claw, “Grundy would be a mite pissed with me if I killed you, don’t you think, Junior?”

“I doubt it, but thanks,” Danny smirked. He yanked his hoodie off and stuffed his purse and backpack inside the black fabric as he continued, “Well, you don’t have to do that. I can handle my own.”

“We’ll see, won’t we? Lose, and you can be in the boil,” Waylon growled as he cracked his knuckles.

“Yeah yeah yeah, keep talking. You already said I wouldn’t taste good,” Danny gathered his shit in his arms and jiggled the bundle at Waylon like it was a baby. It was, sort of, “Do you mind if I stash my thing’s first?”

The meta snorted and stood up straight, “Sure.”

“Close your eyes. I don't want you to see where I hide my shit,” Danny said as he pointed at Waylon, as if to accuse him of snooping, and peered suspiciously over the bundle tucked against his chest.

Killer Croc snorted and closed his eyes. He crossed his arms and listened to the sounds of shuffling for a quick moment before a heavy splash.

Danny watched Waylon shut his eyes. He waited a moment before he shoved his body through the wall and dropped his shit inside the black, claustrophobic space. He pulled back out, and opened his mouth to tell the southern gentleman that he could open his eyes, but paused.

Danny reached back into the space behind the wall, and scooped up one of the bricks that had been abandoned, and chucked it into the rushing water.

“Okay, you’re good,” Danny said as he adjusted his dark blue t-shirt.

“Nah, not really,” Croc rumbled as he charged forwards.

Yellow slit eyes glinted in the low light of the sewers, and the harsh, stained grin stretched wide into a snarl.

Danny grinned back without missing a beat.

Waylon's claws wrapped around the skinny teen as he tackled him into the waters of the sewers, but in the moment before Waylon could close his hands completely, the teen pulled himself up to stand on top of his clenched fists.

Danny's bright, icy eyes stared deep into Waylon's own golden hue and mirrored his wide smile.

"I don't think this is a junction, but I like that you're chomping at the bit!" Danny teased as he pushed off from Waylon's arms He catapulted himself up and over Waylon's head as if it were a game of leapfrog, and pushed off of the muscular back in a secondary leap.

He landed on the ledge as Waylon splashed into the murky river behind him.

The half-ghost laughed even as he slipped on the grime and fell back onto his ass.

Massive hands burst from the water to seize Danny by the shoulders, but Danny let himself fall completely back. He quickly rolled to the wall and scrambled up onto his feet.

Waylon's shiny black claws sunk deep into the grated ledge and yanked. Danny could hear the metal creak and groan as Killer Waylon pulled himself back up. The murky water ran off him like the world's grossest waterfall, but neither Danny no Waylon gave a single fuck about it.

Danny turned on his heels and let himself sprint down the grated path, leaping over massive, muscular arms whenever they made a swipe at him. Danny could never resist the urge to swing an arm down and give Waylon a high five whenever his palm was up facing him as he jumped over the green scutes.

“High five me *one more time* , you little shit!” Waylon growled as he emerged from the dark, dank waters at the corner where Danny was running to.

Danny smirked as he dove right into Waylon’s outstretched arms. He smacked his palms harshly into the villain’s hands with a whoop as they both went tumbling back into the water.

Danny kept his eyes clenched shit and the smile that was stretched across his face tightly pressed as he and Waylon spun through the flowing water. The teenager couldn’t help but let out a cheer when he was finally thrown further upstream by the raging maybe-crocodile-man.

Waylon was on him in an instant, locked arm in arm as he towered over the pale boy, “I’m gonna snap you like a toothpick.”

“Then snap me,” Danny snarked back as he pushed up out of the water as he forced Waylon’s attempt at pinning him back. He paid no attention to the way the sharpened nails dug into his skin beneath the thin shirt, if the shirt was even in the way at all. Despite the way it clung heavily to his skin, Danny couldn’t actually tell.

He couldn’t bring himself to care even if he did.

A laugh bubbled up from his chest as he let himself drop into the filthy water, letting Waylon fall on top of him as Danny rolled them backwards. He planted his sneaker squarely against Killer’s chest and kicked him free into the air.

“You’re going easy on me,” Danny accused with a grin as he burst from the water. He pushed his hair out of his face as dark green arms plunged him back into the water by his sides.

“I can always kill you.”

Danny wrapped his legs around Waylon’s thick arms and forced them to buckle and lift him from the water. He smirked up at the rows of teeth.

“Been there, done that, got the outfit, and all that fun stuff,” Danny dismissed with a strained shrug.

“Fuckin’ Grundy’s Pest,” Waylon snarled as he pitched Danny down the sewer’s tunnel.

The halfa’s back cracked harshly against the brick, and for all of the couple seconds it took for the crocodile meta to race after the chew toy he chucked, Danny couldn’t suck any breath into his lungs.

“Your throw reminds me of the jocks back home,” Danny weakly chuckled as he snatched Waylon’s wrists and spun him through the same brick Waylon had slammed him against a moment ago and watched as Waylon sailed through the debris and wall into a storm water drain. Danny peaked through the gaping hole in the brick and called down to where Croc had splashed into the water, “Pathetic and needing work!”

Croc burst up from the water with a snarl tucking at his lips, but Danny didn’t care. The manic smirk that lit his ice blue eyes grew on his face as he threw himself down into the storm overflow  bypass, “Catch!”

Not that he gave the crocodile man much of a choice.

Danny leaped right into Croc’s chest and forced him backwards into the water as the teen bounced off of his collarbone and dove into the water beyond.

The second he was in the water, rough hands gripped his neck and squeezed. Danny wrapped his legs around Waylon’s neck and dug his fingers into his jaw joint. He forced his fingers into the sensitive gap within the muscles and pushed. For every ounce of pressure Waylon put, Danny returned it.

Waylon jerked his head back to get Danny to let go, and the teen pried his fingers free from his neck, and pushed back before the villain could lunge with his teeth.

“No biting! We’re trying to keep mouth rot at bay, you know, but biting something as sweet as me will give you cavities,” Danny snickered.

“As sweet as molasses,” Killer Croc shot out sarcastically as he swung his claws out at Danny, “ *Get* yer tiny ass over here.”

“Why don’t you get your enormous ass over here?” Danny snarked back as Croc darted through the water towards him, “Yeah, just like that!”

Waylon yanked Danny by the ankle and submerged the brat below the surface.

Waylon’s claws dug into his shoulders as they tumbled forwards through the drainage pipes until Danny slammed Waylon against a sewer grate. The bolts holding it in place groaned and gave way under the pressure, and both Danny and Killer Waylon tumbled into a massive pit of churning grime.

Danny could see massive scaffolding above and different processing and filtering tanks clearly meant to clean out the waste of the water.

It wasn’t hard to guess that maybe, just maybe, Danny had taken the wrestling a little too far.

*Just a little.*

*But it took two to tango.*

*It always took two, didn’t it?*

*That was something Danny knew well, wasn’t it…*

Waylon chucked Danny out of the water and clawed his way out after him.

“Hey, maybe we shouldn’t destroy this place?” Danny tried to protest as he tumbled out of Wayon’s way. The meta’s teeth grazed along Danny’s back as the crocodile meta lunged and missed by a hair, “I said no biting my ass!”

“What are you gonna do about it, bite me?”

“Bitch, I might!” Danny shouted back as he sprinted up the grated maintenance stairways.

Danny didn’t even bother worrying about triggering alarms. Gotham’s utility plants, as Danny had learned, staffed a full nightshift. No, all Danny had to worry about was baiting his hot-headed, bitey friend out of the plant without getting caught.

Danny just prayed that these workers decided they weren’t paid enough to deal with a rampaging meta villain who might have been pissed about being disturbed by the sewer processing plant, and decided to just leave him be.

As Danny raced through the different double-wide doorways to get the fuck out of the plant with said rampaging meta villain constantly two steps behind and almost biting his ass, Danny realized that was probably the case.

Actually, he was almost certain that one of the foreman up in the observatory decks drinking coffee gave him a two finger salute.

Danny didn’t know what to do with that information.

So he did nothing with it. He just burst into the night, sopping wet with sewer juice all over him and a southern hot-head damn near using Danny like a toothpick.

“Waylon! Waylon! Stop! You’re gonna attract Bats!” Danny screeched back at the snarling villain.

“That sounds like a you-problem, Shrimp. I can handle those fuckers just fine.”

Danny let out an ungodly sound as Killer Croc lunged and caught him by the thigh, sending them both into a tumble across the back asphalt of the waterplant’s parking lot.

The halfa heaved a groan as he rolled Waylon over for the final tumble, leaving Danny on top and pinning the amped up croc to the ground by the collarbone.

Danny wrapped his legs around Waylon’s arms to keep them pinned as he pressed into his collarbone.

“Is now a good time to ask if we’re doing this by official wrestling rules, or…?” Danny panted in exhaustion down at Waylon, “Also what spices do you want me to pick up for the boil? Because otherwise, I’ll just end up picking up the spices my friend uses, and I don’t know if yours are different.”

Waylon said nothing for a moment. Danny didn’t mind. It gave him a second to catch his breath.

It had been so long since he could wrestle and spar.

A deep, rumbling chuckle grew in the scute-covered chest beneath Danny as Waylon smirked playfully, “Well, ya can’t go wrong with yer traditional cajun blends.”

“Sure, yeah, I can do that,” Danny hummed in thought.

He sat up slowly to make sure Waylon wouldn’t throw him across the pavement.

Claws wrapped around Danny's shoulders and yanked him into the air.

Danny's confused blue eyes caught Waylon's surprised but amused yellow slitted eyes as Danny was pulled off of Killer Croc by the flap of leathery wings.

*"God fucking damn it, Waylon!"* Danny screeched into the night sky, *"I'm going to bite your fucking ass!"*

# Sky rats and hero abandonment should, by all accounts, make for prime time television gossip, but it doesn't

Chapter Notes

Public Service Announcement:
Don’t fucking dox yourselves in the comments, I will crawl my ass out of the wood works and delete that shit. I can't believe I have to come out and say "Don't reveal information like your fucking location online" but I guess I do. Keep your personal shit personal. Do not release information that could result in your IRL self being found in my comments. This goes further than straight up locations, I'm talking regional identifiers as well, specifically if you go in depth talking about it.

Keep your personal shit personal. I am not asking, and I don't care if you get upset if I have to delete your comment because of it.

Be safe, lovelies. Some people out there would abuse that knowledge, and I don't want that happening to any of you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The clawed feet curled around Danny's upper arms, trapping a portion of his elbow, and keeping his arms from effectively bending and grabbing at the furry ankles on either side of Danny’s head.

Hints of rain began to descend from the sky above, but Danny didn't really get that wet. Or, rather, that much more wet.

He was already soaked.

“Hey! What gives, dude?!” Danny screamed up at the being.

Torn jeans wrapped tightly around muscular legs and were kept in place with a plain black belt. That, Danny could admit, was the most normal part of staring up at a man-sized bat.

Widespread leather wings flapped heavily, ruffling Danny's hair alongside the wind already present in the Gotham night even with most of it plastered to his head.

Danny glared up at the protruding fangs that glinted in the factory lights as Danny was carried up and away. The glittering harbors shone in the distance past the rooftops of apartments that they were coming closer and closer to being eye-level with the tired halfa hanging from the mutant's grasp.

The wind in his face made the heaving of oxygen in his chest slightly easier. Danny could feel the exhaustion that had been held at bay creep into him despite his rising heartbeat. The ache in his muscles grew more and more noticeable, and Danny tried to pretend it didn't affect him as much as it actually did.

He tried to jerk his arms free, but the muscular legs didn't budge at all.

Danny swung his feet forward. His worn out shoes slid fruitlessly against the massive bat dude's jeans and scrambled uselessly as he swung back down.

Danny grit his teeth and swung again, trying to loop his legs around the back of Man-Bat's legs. He couldn't swing far enough back, and, with the little bit of purchase he could find, Danny swung his other foot and kicked hard as he could, driving his foot into Man-Bat's crotch.

The beast above him screeched into the night. Danny could see the traffic below skid to a stop as the screech rattled the windows. The giant bat flew above the streets and in between the apartment buildings of a lower class residential district.

Stephanie was doing an impromptu solo-patrol for the evening. Apparently, Duke was losing his fucking marbles back in the Bat Cave, and no one could control him what so ever, and there was no way to tranq his dumb ass without him seeing it and dodging.

So, that meant that everyone who was in the cave locked themselves down in there with Duke to keep him (and Signal as a result) from being a doofus in the general public, but also for safety. Something about a bloody concussion, but, in Steph's opinion, concussions didn't make you British.

"Spoiler," Oracle's voice crackled to life in her ears, "Man-Bat's been spotted. He seems to be picking citizens to torment, but we're unsure about specifics. He's out in Burnley, but on the move."

Stephanie sprinted to the end of the building and dove off as she shot a line out and swung.

The creature swung Danny forwards and lunged to rip into Danny with his fangs. Danny heaved a kick and planted a kick square against his jaw to keep those sharpened fangs far from his flesh.

Man-Bat's jaw snapped shut. His screech cut itself short with a garbled growl. The meta's muscles spasmed and contracted, sending the intertwined pair tumbling through the sky, fast approaching the pavement below.

Danny cursed to himself as the massive bipedal fucker with wings recovered. Danny jerked down and groaned at the feeling of his shoulders almost popping out of place with the pressure as he swung between Man-Bat's feet.

It wasn't hard to see that people had begun to take their phones out and capture the new villain of the day. As much as that pissed Danny off to no end, there was nothing he could really do about it but do his best to make sure his face wasn't in frame for any of it.

"Let me go, you stupid asshole!" Danny yelled.

*"Why would I do that… when I caught a little Robin?"*

"I am *clearly* not a fucking Robin!"

The raspy, forced speech of the Bat sounded smug for someone who thought Robin was a homeless teen who slept comfortably behind and inside of dumpsters.

"How the heck did you come to that conclusion?!" Danny demanded as he tried to flail.

*"Like it was hard?"* The beast above growled.

"About as hard as not using any of your brain cells, apparently," Danny would slap the smug smirk from his face if he could.

But Danny *could* kick him in the dick again.

Danny took a deep breath that felt like it was feeding the fire in his chest instead of steadying him. He forced his leg up and struck home.

"Oracle, I see him," Steph panted as she sprinted across the rooftops through the steady rain.

Steph watched in horror as Man-Bat dropped the kid from ten stories up. She leaped off the rooftop and dove after the kid.

The poor dude was soaked to the bone in only a ripped up shirt and nasty jeans. He looked like a drowned rat, which was impressive for someone who was getting picked on by a sky-rat.

But why him?

*Eight stories.*

“Hey, Ugly!” Steph screamed at the rampaging scientist, “Pick on someone your own size.”

*Why him?*

*Six stories.*

Steph watched as the scattered cars below rushed ever closer, and the fear on the crowd's faces grew more and more as they fell to the ground.

She could reach him.

She could.

*Four stories* .

She reached through the rain and tried to grip the kid’s arm, but the teenager’s pale, frozen skin was slick with the pouring rain. She couldn’t get a grip, and neither could the kid even as he tried to grab back.

She could still get him.

She could.

She *couldn't.*

Her eyes widened in horror as tears gathered at the edges of her lashes. She stared down at the teen who chose that moment to not stare at his upcoming demise. Steph wished he wouldn't look back at her with those frantic eyes and gritted teeth.

*Two stories.*

The shaky heartbeat in Steph's chest did nothing against years of experience as she was forced to shoot her line and save herself.

She felt the grapple wrap around a traffic light.

She reached out in a last ditch attempt to grab the teen as she was pulled forward.

The boy managed to wrap a hand around hers, but they found no purchase as he continued his free fall and Stephanie swung to safety.

Steph clenched her teeth as the screams of the crowd reached a fevered pitch. She landed in a crouch even as green eyes burned into her memory. She turned around as the sound of beating wings filled her chest with rage, preparing herself to see the gruesome sight of that poor kid broken, bloody, and dead on in the middle of the road.

The crowd on the sidewalk had rushed further back.

Man-Bat was rising from the blood-less highway with the teen hanging painfully by a leg, clutching his head as if to protect himself.

Aa if he would be safe from the teeth and the claws if he wrapped his arms around his face and head.

Man-Bat let out a screech as he took off into the sky before she could even hope to throw anything at him to keep him on the ground.

Stephanie bit back a curse as she shot a line for the roof to follow the pair.

As the street vanished below her feet, she whipped her staff from her belt and swung at the flying furry fucker even as he tried to escape. She managed to strike his wing as they extended downward.

She immediately regretted her decision when Man-Bat lost control and veered.

The mutated scientist almost grated the poor kid in his clutches against the rooftops of the neighborhood's apartments as he tried to recover.

The teen let out a horrible, breathless cry as he was slammed back first into the roof. The sound of a crack echoed over the rooftop as they both tumbled over the edge and into the alleyway.

Stephanie sprinted across the roof and slid on her knees as she practically threw the upper half over the ledge to look down.

A grinning face with teeth as long as her hands rushed up at her instead as Man-Bat rushed back into the air and knocked her back.

Stephanie stumbled backwards and rolled backwards as the bat rushed to the skies. She felt the edge of the roof disappear under her as she rolled off into the alley she had just leapt over.

Man-Bat's screech echoed over the alley as Steph barely caught herself from smashing against the floor of the alley.

She grappled to the top of the building as fast as she could.

Man-Bat was long gone.

Stephanie walked across the rooftop and reluctantly looked down into the alley to see what she already knew.

The boy wasn't there.

"No…" The soft, resigned whisper was practically silent in the night as she sighed.

She tapped her ear. "Hey, Oracle, they're gone. I lost them."

"Looking now, but security street cameras aren't picking up everything, neither is air traffic control for Gotham's airport," Barbara responded immediately. Steph could hear her fingers flying across the keys of her set up in the Clocktower.

"If we find them, that kid's going to need medical care," Steph said as she took off across the rooftops to scour the neighborhood.

"Of course," Barb agreed quickly, "I'm already monitoring for incoming ER patients with injuries consistent with Dr. Langstrom's claw marks. Not a problem."

"That's good, but not what I meant," Steph frowned, "Man-Bat crashed into a roof, and the teenager he was holding took the brunt of it back-first."

“That’s… not good,” Barb frowned, “Dr. Langstrom will be devastated if he severely hurt someone.”

“I’m hoping the kid can walk it off, but I don’t know,” Spoiler said unsurely as she leapt from the ledge of a building and shot a line into the night, “God, am I ever hoping.”

“If you can track them down, I can get the Batmobile to you for an emergency med-evac.”

“But I have to find them first,” Steph reminded herself dully. She frowned as she scanned the Gotham skyline.

Nothing.

Fucking *nothing.*

Like nothing had ever happened in the first place.

“Yep, unfortunately,” Barb sighed, “I take it you didn’t get a tracker on him?”

“No, I was too busy trying to stop the dude from splattering across the pavement like jam.”

“You have a description I can work with?”

Steph frowned as she soared through the air. She tried to recall the features of the teen boy, but…

“No,” Steph admitted, “I don’t. He’s got green eyes. That’s about it. Between the rain and only seeing his face for a second, I got nothing. Indistinct clothing, nothing really distinctive about his appearance.”

“It’s okay, Spoiler, you did everything you could. Let’s focus on trying to find the poor guy.”

“Yeah, yeah…” Steph acknowledged.

It was silent for a few minutes as Stephanie found a good spot to stop and observe the Gotham rooftops.

“How’s the Signal-containment going?”

“Barely managing, actually,” Barb snickered softly, “I think everyone’s realizing it’s for the best that Signal is a hero and not a villain. He’d be a hard one to deal with, for sure.”

“Any casualties?”

“Some of Nightwing’s infinite pairs of leggings, one of which was used to tie Tim to the gymnastic equipment,” Barbara offered with a smirk as she pulled up anything she could think of that would help track Man-Bat to where he’d flown off, “I won’t lie. It’s some prime entertainment.”

The line was quiet for a moment.

Barb smiled sadly, “Listen, we’re going to everything we can for him, he’ll pop up eventually, we just need to be patient. Why don’t you come over? We can watch the entertainment. You’ll know right away if we have an update. Really, I’m seeing nothing about Man-Bat anywhere.”

“... Yeah, you know what, I’m on my way,” Steph sighed, “I gotta cross the city to get back to you. I’ll keep my eyes peeled.”

“Same here,” Barb chuckled, “Got the emergency sonic weaponry at Wayne Enterprises on standby. Just in case.”

“This is Vicki Vale, here live where beloved vigilante, Spoiler, best known for her sassy attitude and kind heart to people in need, abandoned a victim to the villainous Man-Bat this evening as a chase went south but half an hour ago. Police have just cleared the area and deemed it safe to traverse once again. It is unknown at this time who the victim was, but word from authorities is that they will be keeping an eye on the Gotham shoreline in the worst-case scenario that the body of the teen would show up.”

The report never made it to the air. Gotham plunged into darkness with a scream and raining glass from shattered windows.

Steph grappled up to the roof of the Clocktower and slipped in through the hatch on top of the roof.

She made her way into the Ops Center with a tired smile as the room plunged into darkness. She paused and grinned as she moved over to where she knew Barb had set up for the night.

“Shit, Barbara! Did you manage to knock out Man-Bat?" Steph cheered, “Hell yeah! Where is he? I'll go find that kid after we take in Man-Bat.”

She clapped Barb blindly on the shoulder and fist punched the air, but paused when the hacker didn’t join her celebration.

“What’s wrong?”

“That wasn’t me, and it wasn’t any sonic weaponry we have,” Barb denied softly as she removed her hands from the keyboard, unable to do a thing until the power returned, “That was an EMP.”

Chapter End Notes

hey lovelies. so, in classic fashion, i caught a cold. thought i was done being sick after a week, but round 2 has surfaced and fully kicked my ass. don't expect an update next week because i am super not whelmed currently.

# To the sky, sings songs of mourning days long past, and know they fall on deafened ears just as they always have

Danny waited until the flying rat had long left the panicked, crowded streets where everyone had collectively decided that grouping together was the best way to stay safe, apparently. Danny thought that was stupid, but what did *he* know, he was only a hero.

*Not anymore.*

*Not really.*

*It should have been horrifying to watch dad almost rip the steering wheel off of the GAV with how hard he was clenching and yanking it as they gunned it down the interstate. It wasn't. It should have been.*

Danny let his arms fall as the big ass bat flew away from the populace.

"What? Don't like having other bats around? How insecure of you," Danny hissed sarcastically as he tried to keep track of where the sky rat was flying them.

*He was a failure.*

Danny watched the Burnley waterfront disappear completely behind the apartment buildings alongside the water plant he'd been… What would he even call it? Kidnapped? Kidnapped from along the waterfront also disappear behind the rising apartments as the bat bastard flew into Otisburg.

*The invisible weight of Danny's school bag was heavy against his back as he turned his back on the town he'd worked so hard to keep safe. He gave up so much to keep it safe. Didn't they know that? Didn't they understand that? Did they care?*

*He was trying to save himself. Wasn't that okay?*

Danny felt useless as he hung by his legs, watching apartments fade into industrial complexes.

*No, not when it came to the expense of others.*

"Hey, Ugly! I have a question for you!"

He swung himself back and forth. Danny groaned as his back popped and cracked as he stretched it. He rolled his shoulders with a grimace as he made a mental note to dig around in the first aid kit to see if he had any pain killers left.

Probably. He didn't take them that often.

"What do you want from me?" Danny yelled up at the maybe-man. Honestly, Danny had no idea what was going on with the dude squeezing his thighs, but he knew he had some fucking issues.

"If you're *so convinced* I'm fucking Robin, *which I'm not* ," Danny stressed, "Care to explain why the fuck you think you're doing?"

*"Divide… And conquer…"* The beast above growled with a smirk that rolled over his protruding fangs, and with every millimeter of teeth that exposed itself through the snarling grin, a growing cold anger spread through Danny's chest.

*No one ever listened to Danny.*

Even after begging and pleading with the guy, trying to tell him he snagged the wrong person, yelling at him to leave him alone and find a real Robin, he still wasn't listening.

*Why did he bother to hope this would be different?*

Danny knew he heard every word.

*His own parents never listened to him.*

Good to know he could be hated as a hero even when the giant bat cutting off circulation to his thighs had no idea who he was.

*Not that knowing who he was stopped his parents. They knew. They knew exactly who Danny was. What he was. What he became.*

He curled forwards and gripped Man-Bats jeans with frozen fingers. His heart seemed to skip a beat in his chest.

*They hunted him anyway. His dad screamed a promise to rip him apart anyways. His mom promised him pain.*

The wind chilled more and more as they got closer and closer to the Gotham River. The battering rain didn't help, but it was heaven against Danny's sore back.

*The cold brick of the bathroom felt better against his back than the stress of trying to sleep in his own bed. With the comfort of the bandages being the only thing to tuck him in, he let his head tilt back.*

The cold felt good. The tightness in his chest didn't vanish, but it spread, and the pain from the deep tissue bruising that was already starting to turn his back ugly shades of black and purple ebbed down.

*“Inch by inch… molecule by molecule… I will tear you apart for what you’ve become.”*

“You’ve definitely got some fucking nerve,” Danny glared as he gripped one of the worn pockets. He swung outwards and let his right arm hang for a moment as he looked at the beating wings above him, “Thinking that *isolating me* would give you a leg up.”

*Sharpie marker graffiti kept him company as the horrible fluorescent light flickered in the disgusting bathroom. Writing on the wall to Danny’s right said that “Frankie Was Here”, and that a million other people were here in the bathroom right alongside Frankie.*

*No one was here, of course, but Danny knew that wasn’t the point. That didn’t make the loneliness that seeped down into his bones any less prominent.*

Danny pushed the heady exhaustion from his mind as he raised his hand and fired as Man-Bat flapped his wings.

Danny couldn’t help the snarl that grew into a smirk as the blast through the stretched skin between the fourth and fifth finger of Man-Bat’s wing, straight through the center of his left wing.

Man-Bat screeched as his wins spasmed from the pain. Danny could see the strain beneath his fur as he struggled to stay in the air.

Danny wrapped his arms around the damp denim as the bat began to veer hard to the left. Danny watched the wings barely keep the two of them in the air despite how hard he was flapping his wings and flailing for any stable purchase within the sky.

The claws around Danny’s thighs squeezed. Danny grinded his teeth as he tried to watch the beat of the bat wings around him. Man-Bat tilted sideways, and Danny shakily lined another shot through his left wing.

The flying rat couldn't keep himself in the air any longer.

Glimpses of the world around them flashed in Danny's eyes in a blur of fur as they tumbled through the sky over the industrial complexes and into one of Gotham's junk yards. Danny waited until they had soared past the huge piles of junk, only a handful of feet from the ground before he let himself phase from his grasp.

Danny let himself land in a crouch as Man-Bat plowed into the muddied ground behind the halfa. He let himself rock to his feet, turn with a stretch and felt his joints pop in relief.

"I'm not Robin," Danny muttered as he glared at the writhing bundle on the ground, "Not that you believe me, clearly."

Clawed fingers dug deep into the wet, scrap-littered mud as Man-Bat dragged himself up from the twisted ball of fur he'd been on the ground.

The rain came down in steady waves and ran the mud through Man-Bat's fur, staining the brown fur with a deeper, darker brown that held a dank smell of motor oil and melted plastic.

*Danny knew that smell. It reminded him of month-long camping trips in the middle of nowhere. Mom and dad always insisted on bringing their entire lab with them. Countless times, he and dad tinkered in the rain as they fixed the GAV or worked on a brand new Fenton Works project.*

*"If at first you don't make it work, try again, Danno!"*

*But no matter what Danny tried, he couldn't make everything work out with his dad.*

The soaked boy with black hair stared him down from across the small expanse between the towering junk piles. His wild hair dripped water down his pale cheeks. Cold green eyes stayed locked to his own the second that Man-Bat had made eye contact to begin with.

Man-Bat Could have sworn that Robin's eyes were blue.

"If you're so set on fighting me, come get me," Danny called out flatly as the anger and panic gnawed at his sternum and fought for dominance, "Since you *don't want to fucking listen to me!"*

A raspy, hissy-sounding chuckle came through Man-Bat's fangs as stood on his legs and leapt across the stretch of mud, and clutched the boy's shoulders. He moved to snap at Robin's throat, but the boy reached up and seized his collar bone.

*"You Bats, you think you're so slick,"* Man-Bat hissed.

Not just anyone could take on Killer Croc. This twink was obviously a Robin.

"I'm not a fucking Bat!" Danny snarled as he pressed down on his fragile collarbone. His finger slipped in the slick, muddy fur, sunk into the meat at the base of his neck, and gouged into the sensitive nerves, "I know you can hear me, you furry bastard!"

Man-Bat screeched and pulled Danny closer. The halfa's feet dislodged easily in the mud and slid closer as Danny tried to brace himself only to fail.

The moment Danny was dislodged, Man-Bat tossed him through the air. He took satisfaction in watching the punk hit the mud just as he had.

*He'd flown for so long. He'd wanted to cry when he finally got on the first bus and was able to breathe. The chilled velvet of the buss was heaven against his burning ribs. His backpack sat on his legs, hugged tightly to his chest as he held in the pained screams that clawed at the back of his throat.*

Danny heaved air into his lungs even as his breath quickened. The exhaustion crawled its way up his spine even as the rain poured down and tried to wash it away.

*He had wanted his parents. They were coming, and that was a very, very bad thing. He kept running.*

Danny pushed himself back up with shaking arms. He sat back on his legs and looked across the yard as ManBat changed towards him. He was so tired.

“Clearly you don’t want to bother to listen to anything I say.”

*He didn’t want them anymore. He wanted them to stay away. He wanted to stay away. He had to.*

Danny yanked his legs back underneath him, and threw himself forwards. He snatched Man-Bat’s clawed hands in his. Danny swung him around using his own momentum and pitched him into a mountain of scrap. Man-Bat wasted no time in clambering out and charging again.

Danny didn't hesitate as he dodged and swung back return volleys as Man-Bat chased him around the clearing. The ground became more and more muddy with the constant disturbances and bodies being slammed down.

Recovery felt like quicksand as they rolled around in gunk and grime.

It felt like one time, just one time, would be all it took for Danny to get stuck in the ground and not be able to free himself from their grasp. The ground’s grasp.

*He had just wanted them to love him. Vlad had been right all along.*

It didn’t stop Danny.

“I’m not Robin, but if you want a fight, I’ll fight. You’ll regret not leaving me alone,” Danny growled as he swung his fist and decked the life-sized furry across the jaw and watched him sprawl against the slippery mud.

*He hadn’t wanted to see them look at him like he was a monster.*

The acid in his chest dissolved the last of his restraint as his lungs heaved with breath. His hands shook with anxiety even as the rage burned through his veins.

*He didn’t want to watch as the understanding in their eyes led to disgust and rage.*

Danny’s hands scrambled against the slick, muddy fur as his frozen hands gripped the bat’s chest as they rolled. He felt something snag against his fingers through the anger and the panic that filled his head and glow even through the matted, muddy fur.

*“Mom, please, it’s me, it’s Danny.”*

*“I know.”*

“I’m not fucking Robin, no matter how much you want me to be!” Danny screamed frantically as he held Man-Bat down in a partial pin. The blazing, toxic green shine that reflected back at Danny only freaked him out more as his glowing, panicked eyes stared back at him, “I’m just me, I'm just Danny, just good for nothing, *useless* Danny. I’m not even a hero anymore! *Certainly* not fucking Robin.”

*“Dad!”*

Man-Bat scratched for purchase to get out from underneath the teenager, but failed as the teen slammed his back down into the mud, planted his feet on either side of his torso, and dragged him into the air.

*“Please don’t do this!”*

Clawed hands raked against the pale arms that held him up in the air. Man-Bat curled forwards and let out a loud screech.

*“Ghost scum like you should be cut up and shredded until there's nothing left.”*

The sound echoed harshly around the junkyard. The vindication that had been growing in Kirk’s chest vanished as the air seemed to change. In a moment of clarity, the sense of reason Kirk was known for, in all his brilliance, broke through the clouded thoughts of the beast with a whisper of having taken things too far.

That whisper was squashed easily even as his fur stood on end as if something dangerous had entered the area.

Man-Bat snarled and screeched at the boy even as the ring on his dirty hands grew brighter, and the faint outline of flickering green fire faded into view above the teenager’s head. The boy’s eyes brightened as he snarled right back.

*He tried. He had tried so hard to get them to love him. He was still Danny.*

Danny’s lips curled back over his teeth, and the scream that he’d been holding back tore its way out of his throat as he lashed out at the bat person.

*Most people had an unclear memory of when the last time their parents stopped picking them up because they were too big, too grown up. Danny remembered very clearly. It was the morning he’d been outed, just two hours prior.*

Danny felt his arms pull Man-Bat closer even as he flailed and squirmed, much too clouded by the panic and anger flooding his system demanding he both run and stay to get his

recompense. The pained shriek that ripped it's way free from Danny's throat flooded the area as tears trailed down his cheeks, and the devastation he'd been holding in tore its way through the scrapyard.

*His dad had bear-hugged him. His dad had chased him down the interstate.*

Anything from old cars and trucks to discarded utilities like washing machines crack and crumble around them.

*His dad loved him more than life itself. His dad hated him with the same passion that consumed when trying to destroy the dead.*

The piles of metal scrap tore themselves town into tiny pieces. The mud Danny had managed to plant his feet in tore away and mixed with the growing mountain of demolished rubble.

*Danny couldn't bring himself to hate his parents regardless of how much they hated him.*

The distressed halfa watched blood trickle from the bat's folded back ears, but he couldn't stop the scream even as his face twisted from rage to heartbreak. The bat looked like he was screaming back. Danny couldn't hear him.

*He was sorry.*

His chest squeezed harder as he wailed into the night. The body grasped tightly in his hands fell limp after awhile, but Danny wasn't sure how long "awhile" was.

*He was so sorry.*

The wail in his lungs broke into wet sobs that warbled through the broken piles of junk as Danny's exhaustion ate away at the last of his energy.

Gotham City's glow that reached up to the clouds seemed to flicker for a brief moment before it vanished, and the city rested in total darkness. The immediate area around Danny remained softly aglow even as Danny broke down into heavy sobs.

The faint sound of shattered glass accompanied the sounds of crunching metal as Danny's knees gave out from underneath him.

The soft glow of green that had shined against the muddied, matted fur slowly receded as the crumpled, broken, and bleeding body that lay unconscious in the mud at Danny's knees shrunk back into a regular half-naked man.

# It’s just me, myself, and the unconscious man drooling on my shoulder as we walk through streets of glittering glass

Danny shakily gripped at the poor man’s neck as he felt for a pulse through his crying. The exhaustion pulled at his eyes and weighed his arms down like lead.

But the guy did have a pulse.

*He had a pulse. He was worth life.*

“Thank fucking god,” Danny said hoarsely, “CPR in a mudhole probably would’ve sucked…”

*It was more than he could ever say about himself.*

It felt like the world around him was sinking deep, deep into the mud that Danny was kneeling in. Everything was as murky as the rivers of water that had begun to trickle down into the pit and gather around where the two bodies were pressed together.

Danny wanted to wipe his face, but the disgusting grime on his hands kept his hands firmly from doing that. He sat there in silence, staring at nothing.

Staring at the dark sky above. It looked like Gotham was gone, but Danny didn’t think it was.

*It could have been, a part of Danny knew. It could have all been gone.*

The water at the bottom of the mud pit trickled in slowly. Danny watched it gather around the man’s head.

“I’m sorry I’m not Robin,” Danny whispered weakly as he sat there staring at everything with a heavyset disconnect.

Staring at the water trickle in.

At the man unconscious at his feet.

At the destruction he could vaguely see above the edge of the pit’s ridge.

*When did his wail get that strong?*

He forced himself to his feet as the stuttered breaths that forced their way from his chest settled into a numb, bone-deep tiredness.

*It felt a lot like asking when his life had gone so wrong.*

Danny tried not to think about the exhaustion that consumed him and ate away at his emotions as the rage and sorrow vanished back down into the recesses of his chest.

He squatted down and pulled the not-so-bat person up over his shoulders and let himself drift up out the pit.

The ripped and ruined sneakers landed softly on the edge of where they’d crashed into the junkyard.

The Gotham night greeted him like an old friend despite the lack of the glow the sky always seemed to have with the heavy light pollution. He glanced around at the shredded piles of scrap, trying to remember what the piles had contained.

He couldn’t.

It was hard to think past reminding himself to inhale.

He was pretty sure he was colder than the man slung across his shoulders, but Danny didn’t know for sure. The halfa took a moment to swing the man around, so Danny was holding the poor guy in a piggy back with his arms draped over Danny’s soaked shoulders with his head slumped against one of his shoulders instead of driving his shoulders into the dude’s ribs.

He could feel the man’s warm breath through the torn, muddy shirt. It was a small comfort as the rain fell from the sky and mixed with the blood that was trickling down from the brunette’s ears.

Danny secured his arms beneath the brunette’s legs and threaded his fingers together in front of him so his arms wouldn't fall and cause him to drop the poor fucker.

The halfa glanced around warily and made his way through the rubble of the junkyard. He didn’t know whether or not he was going to apologize to the owner yet. Buck had been griping about how the machine’s that crunched the scrap up so he could sell it had busted a month ago and was too expensive to replace.

A deep sigh worked its way deep from Danny’s chest.

Danny was going to fix the machine when he took his daughter out of town in two weeks to see her grandma, but he’d probably fix it sooner now.

He didn’t bother with leaving through the back section where the fence could be pulled back. He left through the front gate. He didn’t bother finding the key to unlock the gate manually as he saw the lack of power. He just phased through the thick chain link.

For the first time since Danny moved to Gotham, he walked down a street that was completely unlit by street lights.

“Sorry I lost it on you. Granted, I don’t know if you can, uh… well, hear me,” Danny trailed off awkwardly as he piggybacked the unconscious half-naked brunette down the sidewalk.

“I don’t use my powers very often anymore, y’know, personal crap and all that,” Danny murmured uselessly to the unconscious dude drooling on his shoulder, “Perks to being me? My powers have always been weird.”

Danny didn’t bother waiting at the intersection for a light to flicker on. It wasn’t going to. He crossed with a little hop as he climbed the curb on the other side of the street.

He continued bitterly, “Perks to being the Ghost King? My powers are weirder, I guess.”

Danny dully glanced around at the damaged buildings that still stood as if held together by hopes, prayers, and lots of craft glue.

“Fuck me on that one, honestly.”

The hush of the rain on the pavement was a balm on his nerves as much as it was refreshing.

It wasn’t hard to find his way back from the edge of Amusement Mile and Otisburg and walk to a clinic he knew in the Narrows.

He walked in and sat the brunette in one of the last available chairs and left without anyone looking at him except for the nurse coming to check out who’s been dropped off.

“Tommy,” She murmured with a nod, “Can never leave well enough alone, can you?”

“Not this time, no,” Danny whispered back as he slipped out of the urgent care clinic and left Lavender’s coworker to look after his mess.

The streets were covered in shattered glass, and cars were askew all over the asphalt and occasional sidewalk. Abandoned. Drained. Dead.

Not one place seemed to have a hint of power. Danny wanted to feel guilty, but he also wanted to feel a lot of things. However, resignation was what sat next to the peace in his ribcage like a child on a jungle gym.

“Good news, I guess,” Danny murmured as he kicked some of the glass from his path, “You would have come for my ass if this led me down a wrong path, I think.”

Danny looked up at the sky with tired, baggy eyes as he continued to walk through the silent mayhem of Gotham’s forced power outage with a haunting knowledge that most places outside of Amity weren’t equipped for ghostly fallout.

He knew with certainty there was nothing else he could do to fix the situation except wait for the power systems in Gotham to reboot or for the technicians to fix the damaged pieces of the grid. Danny didn’t linger for long on the main streets. He ducked into the alleyways of the Narrows and vanished into the territory he arguably knew the best.

He slipped through the alleys and lanes, pausing to check in quickly with anyone even if the other homeless people he’d run into weren’t happy to see him. Usually they weren’t mad, but he could absolutely tell which were folks that had participated in the revolt against Hood.

Danny especially didn’t dawdle around them.

It was an hour before he ran into someone he knew again, and it was so fucking amusing to watch Devin do a triple take and stare at him in confusion.

Danny couldn't help the playful smirk that worked its way across his face as Devin pounded his fist against his little underling's before sprinting down the alley they'd been passing, and b-lining it straight for Danny.

"Tommy!" Devin called as he slowed to a stop right in front of him, "Dude, your fucking *neck!* "

Danny raised an eyebrow as he rubbed his neck.

He hadn't realized it was sore.

"Yeah, it's fine," Danny chuckled, "Don't worry much about it buddy. You know, I figured Lavender would have kept her baby bro in tonight, everything considered."

"Actually, it's more of a neutral day," Devin corrected off handedly before they continued on with a darker expression than they usually had with Danny. Danny didn't take it personally, "And no, Lav was busy at work when Man-Bat was terrorizing Gotham. Anyways, no changing the subject. The fuck happened?"

"My bad, baby sibling," Danny nodded along, "Someone tried picking a fight with me. That's all. No biggie, Dev. These will go away in a week or two," He dismissed as he waved at his neck.

"If I find who did this, Dumpster? They're a fucking dead man," Dev hissed as they reached up and tapped Danny's collar bone. Danny hid his wince.

“I can take care of myself, you know, but thanks!” Danny snickered, “Really, you don’t have to worry. It’s done.”

“I don’t think you understand, man, so lemme fuckin’ spell it out for you,” Devin started darkly, “No one fucks with the Alley Kids. You think we fuck around for kicks? No. Penguin stays far away from us, and Mask refuses to touch the streets we run on because trying it is a death sentence.”

“Uh…” The older teen said stupidly as the second in command gripped the crook of his arm before the lanky teen could vanish down the way like he was known to do.

“The last time Penguin tried gunning for Hood? It wasn’t Hood’s main crew that stopped that bastard. The Alley Kids ripped his crew to shreds, and he ran bare bones for months,” Devin snapped out, “Tommy, answer me. Who fucking did this shit?”

Danny awkwardly leaned down as his smile fell, “Devin, I promise you I’m fine. It’s done. I have no fucking idea who it was,” Danny lied, but was it lying if you didn’ know the giant bat’s real name? No. Granted, it could have been Waylon, “Look, I was going to go find a good spot to crash, but if it makes you feel better, you can take a closer look at my neck?”

Devin narrowed his eyes as he looked at the massive ring of black and blue and horrible purple around Tommy’s neck.

Despite how sore it probably was, Snacks didn’t look very bothered at all. He really did just look tired.

Devin scoffed and tugged the older teen down to peer at the indistinguishable bruises, “My guy, you look like you threw down with Grundy.”

Tommy snickered as he tilted his head back and let Devin look, “Nah, I’d know if it was Grundy.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. He hasn’t been very active since you've been in Gotham, but sure, you’d recognize him,” Devin agreed sarcastically as he let go of Tommy, “Alright, scram then, you idiot. Don’t get jumped again.”

Tommy stood back up straight with a dumbass grin on his face and gave him a little wave, “Sure thing, kiddo. I’ll see you around.”

Danny waited for Devin to turn and head back first before he retreated back down the alley thinking of another kid that could get just as huffy. It was cute. A little horrifying, maybe, but considering Youngblood led a gang of pirates, death and destruction was probably decently normal for a ghost how many hundreds of years old.

Danny didn’t know either way.

Besides, he’d feel like a bit of a hypocrite, all things considered.

It was a long, quiet walk over one of the many bridges in Gotham with black water below, and dark sky above.

Cars were abandoned on the bridge, which was quickly becoming a familiar sight even as the guilt Danny felt for temporarily breaking them in the first place grew.

By the time Danny reached the other side of the bridge, a glow was quickly beginning to return to Gotham and seemed to be slowly spreading.

The last of the tightness in Danny’s chest relaxed.

He didn’t break things beyond repair.

*He wished he could say that more often.*

It was nice to see the city lights.

*Amity was never this bright.*

Danny disappeared into the streets of the Upper East Side as the street lights slowly flickered back to life. It made the scattered glass on the streets shine bright and feel a lot like someone had laid the stars at Danny’s very feet.

It was beautiful.

It was horrifying.

It was all Danny’s fault.

Danny found himself hard pressed to care as much as he felt like he should have as the peaceful glittering of the shattered glass twinkled like starlight as he walked through the streets.

As the power was restored to the neighborhood, Danny could see the bricks of the buildings stand unmarred by the scars of his scream.

Billboards flickered to life around him as he crossed through an empty intersection. As Danny crossed over the painted guidelines, the billboard across from him flickered to life with a familiar bright teal that made his heart quicken, though he couldn't tell if it was panic or relief as he turned to look.

On the biggest billboard at the intersection was Ember McLain, shredding on the guitar that Danny had snapped and broken countless times.

Her hair looked almost normal, as if it was half-curls and fiery waves instead of actual fire and flames. Her gray skin looked more lifelike than he was used to seeing, but it didn’t matter.

What mattered was the text next to Ember’s billboard picture.

Ember McLain’s *I Will Remember* World Tour.

She’d be in Gotham soon.

# Can you hear my reprieve echo across Gotham? Because I only see the city's glow

Danny didn't bother slipping through the sewers until he crossed one of the bridges and was a lot closer to where he stashed his things.

He didn't bother trying to avoid the puddle gathered over the manhole cover as he phased through it. He was already soaked and covered in layers of mud. One more layer of grime wasn't about to make a fucking difference.

*One more layer of grime would never make a difference.*

The halfa floated through the roaring sewer tunnels as the water raced below him even though he just meandered along. He was too tired to rush past the rain water.

He'd had to double back in order to pop his head through the correct wall and find his stuff, but he was tired enough that he couldn't bring himself to mind.

Danny slumped down into the rubble next to his clothes in the dark with a heavy sigh. He planted a foot against the outer wall and felt his intangibility spread through the bricks.

The water rushing through the sewers sent a chilled breeze through the wall, filling the small space with fresh air.

It was nice. It was soothing.

Danny let his head rest against the discarded brick, and listened to the trickling water as he fished his phone from the pocket of his sweater.

**Tommy:** Devin's okay

**Tommy:** Saw them not too long ago

**Lavender:** Oh thank fuck

**Lavender:** Wait my phone didn't work before

**Lavender:** What the fuck

**Lavender:** How the fuck

**Tommy:** Power's coming back on

**Tommy:** Mine worked just fine

**Lavender:** Tommy what the fuck

Danny didn't mind waking up to the little sealed space being cold as hell. That's what happened when the chilled bricks sucked the heat from the space. That didn't bother him enough to wake up.

It was the hand grabbing his foot that was the more immediate thing that his brain focused on.

Danny pushed himself up blearily and blinked in the pitch black of the room. He leaned forward and ran his fingers across the brick separating him and Grundy. He let out a soft little hum as he wiggled his foot in his hand and knocked against the brick.

After a brief moment, a return knock echoed loudly in the tiny space. Danny snickered and phased his foot through Grundy's hand and back through the brick.

He felt around in his things for the walkie-talkie and chuckled as he pressed the button, “Gimme a second, buddy. I just got up.”

The radio in his hand chimed back almost immediately with the bass tone he’d heard so many times, “Danny in the wall.”

Danny couldn’t hide the warm smile that grew on his face, tough the heavy black of the room did a good job of it.

“Yeah, but I’m fine,” Danny sent back as he pulled the ripped up shirt off of himself, “There’s a comfy little space back here.”

Danny chucked the shirt into a corner, quickly followed by his jeans and boxers as he stripped and threw on his spare set of clothes quickly so Grundy wouldn’t get impatient and decide he was coming in. He reluctantly kept his socks and shoes on to be dealt with later. He pulled his purse on, pushed the bag to the back, and slung his backpack on before pulling his sweater on over top of everything.

The teen ran his hand through his hair and stepped through the wall with a tired grin. He didn’t even blink when Grundy scooped him up so he was sitting in the crook of his arm, “Hey, big guy. How’ve you been?”

Grundy scowled down at him, but Danny didn’t mind. That was his usual expression anyways.

Danny lounged in between Grundy’s arm and chest and let his legs hang lazily as the zombie turned from the little nook that Danny was for sure going to clean up and turn into his own space.

It was so easy to drift back into a lazy doze against his buddy’s shoulder. The water was quieter. More hushed than the roar it was before.

“Kingdan fought Croc.”

“Yeah,” Danny agreed softly without opening his eyes, “It was fun. Probably got a little carried away, but it was fun.”

Grundy let out a grumble that Danny couldn’t help but laugh at.

“Well, I did tell you I could take him. I won, by the way,” Danny sassed, “And even though, uh, what was his name… Devin called him Man-Bat? Picked a fight with me, I won against him too. Wasn’t planning that fight, but he was insistent, and I lost my cool really bad.”

Danny could feel the scowl deepen even though Grundy didn’t squeeze him at all or move differently as he walked down the tunnel.

“I gotta find Waylon sometime and ask what day works best for him to have a cookout,” Danny yawned.

The soft sound of the water splashing around Solomon’s ankles was the last thing he really heard as he fell back asleep.

Grundy let him.

Grundy was content to carry the tiny King through the sewers and let him sleep after disturbing him when he’d grabbed the familiar torn up sneaker that had been inexplicably sticking from the wall.

Danny didn't need to know that Killer Croc had found him and told him everything before he'd taken a trip through his territory to find him.

"Congratulations on the kid, but keep it all t' yerself, ya here?" Croc laughed.

"I don't wanna fucking know who you tangoed with to create that little shit, but he's Langstrom's fuckin' issue now."

"Poor bastard doesn't stand a wink of a chance."

Of course he wouldn't. Danny was strong. Danny was Grundy's. Grundy was Danny's

"He fights good. Had me pinned for a little bit there. Bet yer one proud daddy, ain't cha? How you hid him for so long, I'll never know."

And if Langstrom seriously hurt Danny, he'd be dead.

Danny woke up an ungodly amount of hours later.

It was comfortably warm in the crook of Grundy's arm where he was nestled. It was a different kind of relief than the cold brick of the sealed room.

He felt like shit.

"I'd ask who hit me with a fucking bus, but I know it was a building and not a bus," Danny grumbled with a scowl on his face.

“Grundy kill him.”

Danny patted his chest in consolation and waved it off, “Nah, it’s cool. Besides, I’m pretty damn sure that he might have things a little worse than me. I’m pretty durable.”

Grundy looked down at him and raised a massive hand. Danny watched the zombie slowly wrap his hand around his throat.

“Oh, yeah, nah, I’m good,” Danny grinned as he wrapped his hands around Grundy’s, “I’m fine. To be honest, I don’t remember when that actually happened last night. It’s fine though. It’ll heal soon enough.”

Danny gently pried Grundy’s hand away even though the cold grip on his neck felt like a perfect ice pack.

He pulled his phone from the safety of his hoodie pocket and couldn’t help the laughter at the onslaught of Lavender. He didn’t understand the first chunk of it that he’d apparently received since passing out with it being in Spanish, but the second half of it was more comprehensible.

**Lavender:** Tommy I swear to fucking god, I will kill you myself

**Lavender:** What the fuck do you mean you were jumped?!

**Lavender:** Devin said you were missing everything

**Lavender:** No sweater

**Lavender:** No bag

**Lavender:** Fucking nothing

**Lavender:** Ay, Dios mío, you are fucking ridiculous

**Lavender:** And you didn't even come to my apartment!

**Lavender:** What the fuck did I even show you my keys for

**Lavender:** You little shit

**Lavender:** Trying to fucking die on my watch.

**Lavender:** I cannot fucking believe you

**Lavender:** I will kill you myself if you don't wake from the dead and answer me

**Lavender:** Devin said your neck looked like someone smeared dark paint all over you

**Lavender:** And then you walked off into the night!

**Lavender:** What is wrong with you!

**Lavender:** I've seen tracheas be crushed and show less bruising

**Lavender:** Dumpster

**Lavender:** Dumpster

**Lavender:** Answer me you little shit

**Tommy:** I'm fine

**Lavender:** You are fucking not fine!

**Lavender:** Black and fucking blue

**Lavender:** That kind of damage to your neck

**Lavender:** I cannot fucking believe you convinced Devin to let you go

**Tommy:** I already ran into Rosie

**Tommy:** Dropped off some poor bastard at the clinic and she was on shift

**Lavender:** Rosalina would have given you an ice pack at least, if not demanded you let her look down that twink-ass throat of yours

**Tommy:** My ass is not a twink

**Lavender** : No

**Lavender:** All of you is

**Lavender:** Rosie says she saw your neck and let you walk out of the clinic?!

**Lavender:** Rosie will not be able to run from la chancla the next time I see her

**Lavender:** You better come over at some point today

**Tommy:** I mean, I'll see what I can do

**Tommy:** You or your girlfriends wouldn't happen to have something that can cover something like this, would you?

**Tommy:** I'll tutor Devin all year

**Lavender:** Tempting, from a drop out

**Tommy:** Hey my grades sucked, but if you don't ask me to teach him English, I can bring his grades up from just passing.

**Tommy:** I had good grades in science.

Danny couldn't help the bubbling laughter that had him gripping Grundy's shoulder so he didn't fall over the edge of his grip, "Oh my god, okay, I love my friend, but damn, she's going to kill me."

Danny felt a low vibration through Grundy's chest as he hummed his acknowledgement before tacking on his own two cents, "Danny already dead."

"Hell yeah I am, but she doesn't know that. But also? I'm still alive, so it's an interesting position," Danny grinned cheekily, "Grants me access to the vault of death jokes and no one can stop me. I've decided that's a right you gain when you die."

Danny grinned mischievously as his phone pinged again.

**Lavender:** And all you want in exchange for free tutoring is something to cover up those bruises?

**Tommy:** I mean, if you'd also like to paint my nails every once and awhile, I'm happy to accept that too

**Lavender:** Fucking done deal, Dumpster

**Lavender:** Do you understand how much it is for a fucking tutor?

**Lavender:** Let alone a tutor for Devin?

**Lavender:** Little lieutenant junior of Hood's mini-me mafia?

**Tommy:** Yeah by the way

**Tommy:** About that

**Tommy:** Devin said the Alley Kids were responsible for decimating Penguin's forces and I just wanna know if that's true

**Lavender:** They're a menace, and they better be glad they're my sibling

**Lavender:** But yes

**Lavender:** Hood found out two days after they'd finished

**Lavender:** Nobody expects children to come for your fucking head, and every kid in the gang was trained to shoot by Hood's squad.

**Lavender:** Or Hood himself

**Tommy:** I mean, I still love them. They're my brats

**Lavender:** Yes, but now you see why finding a tutor for that fucking brat is harder than being able to afford one

**Tommy:** I can see that yeah

**Tommy:** I mean, I'm not in the gang, but they tolerate me

**Tommy:** They're like pigeons

**Tommy:** I feed them and they leave me be

**Lavender:** Ducklings, more like

**Lavender:** Anyways, sold. Congratulations Mr. Tutor.

**Lavender:** I'll get you a choker collar. I should have one around here, and if not, I know some girls. We'll make it happen

**Lavender:** You brat

Danny cackled and swung his feet as he thought of Devin's expression at being forced to learn for school.

"Oh my god, Grundy, this is going to be great! My buddy has something to cover the bruises on my neck. The price? Tutoring her little shit of a sibling, Devin. Love that kid, honestly. He's one of the kids in Red Hood's Little baby gang thing he has going on, so if you see kids looking like they're in organized crime, maybe leave them alone," Danny shrugged, "They're

the ones in that one sewer tunnel, remember? Anyways, I think they're scared of you, maybe. I don't really know. They don't seem to give a fuck about Penguin or some dude name Zazz? So maybe not, but who's to say."

Grundy said nothing as Danny ranted. He just walked along listening to him type and ramble, "Grundy know Zsasz. Grundy work with him before."

"Oh, neat! Is he an asshole, nice or…?" Danny asked as he shifted in Grundy's arms so his legs were thrown over Grundy's shoulders and his back was stretched over his forearm.

"...Grundy thinks Zsasz is more asshole than nice," The behemoth grumbled as he readjusted his arm to support Danny and keep him from falling in the water.

"Ah, 'use you, lose you' type of guy? I know some guys like that," Danny hummed as he texted Lavender about letting Devin learn about his new tutor by surprise, and why that was a good idea. Lavender didn't agree, but who was the tutor here?

Danny's phone pinged as another text from Lavender came through with a picture of a cutesy looking collar that Danny for sure would want to wash if he didn't know that Lavender cleaned her gear thoroughly after every use.

He frowned as he zoomed in.

**Tommy:** That's not going to be a wide enough band to hid the bruising, Lav

**Lavender:** Jesus

**Lavender:** Okay

**Lavender:** how much wider does it need to be??

**Tommy:** Uh… another inch? Inch and a half?

**Lavender:** Who fucking choked you?!

**Lavender:** Bane?!?!

**Tommy:** Bane of my fucking existence

**Tommy:** But no

Chances are, the bruises were mainly from Waylon, but also maybe that furry Man-Bat bat-bastard too.

**Lavender:** Hold up, I'll call Matilda

**Tommy:** Thanks girl

**Tommy:** You're the best

**Lavender:** I know

**Tommy:** I'll make sure I return it when the bruises heal but I don't need cops stopping me on the streets, you know?

**Lavender:** I get it, Dumpster, Don't you even worry

**Lavender:** I will get you the bdsm collar of your fucking dreams

**Tommy:** … Thanks?

Danny put his phone back in his pocket and stretched.

He let himself roll off of Grundy's arm even though the zombie moved to accommodate his friend's freefall.

Danny moved away from the hands that tried to snag him back from the air with a cheerful laugh, "Sorry Grundy, but this is my last set of clothes. I gotta go get more today," Danny grinned as he checked his phone. He blinked, "Or tonight, I guess. Tonight works better, actually."

Danny drifted over and pulled Grundy into a strong hug, though Grundy didn't return it with any strength.

“I’ll see you later, buddy, Thanks for letting me sleep on you, and thanks for not breaking my ribs just now,” Danny smirked against his shoulder blade, “You’re my lifesaver.”

# Within the procession of the aftermath, nothing demands you to feel outside of the feelings you demand

Danny peaked his head through the first manhole cover he came across while keeping himself firmly invisible which was a good thing because apparently he was coming out on a main street of the Diamond District.

He kept the sheepish expression on his face hidden as he made his way to the closest alcove and faded back into view behind a dumpster.

The halfa stepped out from behind the tarnished bin and took a breath as the cars drove by. It was a relief to see them working again. He couldn't help but wonder how much money mechanics had made in the past day just going around boosting cars or replacing batteries that Danny accidentally fried.

Danny couldn’t help the guilt that ate him alive for the people who couldn’t afford that kind of expense.

He hoped that they’d chalked it up to a villain attack and had mechanical issues covered by the city of Gotham or something. Danny figured that if that was something that was done when the town almost burnt to the fucking ground, maybe it also applied to Danny damn near frying Gotham’s power grid completely and damaging a couple miles worth of buildings.

Hopefully.

Danny readjusted his hood so it sat higher around his neck before he walked from the alley and joined the sparse crowd on the sidewalks.

He didn’t mind people avoiding him tonight. He’d had a chaotic enough day. They could assume whatever they wanted to assume about him.

Didn’t matter to him at fucking all as he made his way to the fashion district.

Danny needed new clothes.

What was the harm in getting some for the girls while he was at it?

The Bat’s had left Damian in his room to cool off. Bruce knew his son was still pissed at him. That was fine. He could have the space he needed, and when he was ready, Bruce might finally have a better thing to say to Damian that didn’t sound like Bruce thought he was a baby who needed protecting.

He’d been shorter than Dick when he arrived on Bruce’s doorstep, and it was hard to let that go.

He hadn’t expected Damian to burst into the Cave, disheveled and panting as he ran for the crowded platform.

“Father!”

“Damian, listen, I’m sorry, but you’re grounded, and while I want to talk with you, maybe tonight isn't the best time for that,” Bruce said firmly as he looked at Duke going hand to hand with Cass after body slamming Tim to the floor. Tim still lay curled up where he was slammed, still begging for mercy.

“No! You listen, Father!” Damian snarled, “The city is without power! No technology works regardless of it’s form.”

Bruce’s brows furled as he reached out, “Damian, wait a second.”

Damian spun around as he ripped his uniform from its stand, “I do not have time for your parenting choices. Sonic weaponry just knocked out the power grid and damaged the city. I also cannot get in contact with Gordon at the Clocktower, nor Brown on patrol.”

“Damian, please, we can talk about whatever is going on,” Bruce pleaded softly.

“You do not wish to talk, you wish to presently assert your superiority, and I do not have time for that,” The youngest scowled, “Gotham is in crisis! The only technology in the city that works is here in the cave. Gather all the emergency medical devices. We are going to the hospitals to save whoever we can until the power returns.”

“Gotham’s prepared for power outages,” Tim called out in confusion.

“It is,” Damian agreed amicably, “But so were we, and we were prepared for much worse than mere power outages. The equipment upstairs cannot reach Gordon nor Brown. Something is wrong. We need to go.”

By the time the power returned to Gotham, the rift that had grown between Bruce and Damian was filled with the corpses of those that had passed away in the hours without medical support for their own needs and the needs of crisis as vehicles across Gotham ended up in accidents, though most car accidents were nonfatal.

Damian knew there wasn't much that could be done, but seeing the devastation on his Father’s face as he realized Damian wasn’t acting out for attention was more relieving than he was comfortable admitting.

Jason Todd was a man built, not from Gotham bricks, but rather the leftover material found along the sides of the road at construction sites that patched up the houses of the Gotham Projects.

When the power vanished and glass rained from the sky with the sound of a horrible scream, it was nothing new. Gotham breaking was never anything new.

Nor was Gotham trying to fix itself. As he joined in trying to fix the chaos, he sat comfortably in the knowledge that his men around the city would be doing the same.

Roy was happily wrapped up in Jason's blankets in bed and happily gaming when the power vanished. The laptop that was but an extension of Roy's brand new, highly sensitive technology died and never turned back on despite power returning to the apartment.

Roy's Bluetooth headphones were much the same after filtering the broken scream right into Roy's ears and getting whipped off his head, though in the case of the headphones, it was far more likely that they no longer worked because they were in broken chunks on the floor.

"... Jason is paying for another computer," Roy grumbled as he climbed out of Jay's bed and snagged his bow, "I fucking hate Gotham."

When the power came back to Gotham one power grid at a time in an inexplicable flurry, Tim managed to re-establish connection with Babs and Steph at the Clocktower.

Man-Bat had been harassing Gotham.

Steph said that he watched him steal a teen from the streets and rough him up before disappearing into the night. The power outage meant that no one would be able to see if someone matching his description had made it to one of the hospitals yet.

Or morgue, but Tim didn't want to think about it that way.

As Tim took to the skies after giving the Gotham power grid the best boost he could, he realized just how off Damian had really been lately.

His suspicions for why had been confirmed in the worst ways. Bruce had been acting weird since he had grounded Damian, and Tim hadn't known how to really process Bruce's weirdly overly-distant attitude.

Danny didn't mind scrambling up grungy back-alley ladders onto the roofs of the diamond district to avoid the commotion of mobsters taking advantage of the returned power grid to boost their cars and get the fuck out of dodge before the Bats could find them.

Danny didn't have much issue with that, so long as they didn't take issue with him.

*So long as they didn't hurt anyone when he was the only one around.*

He was happy to just take the long way around and traverse the rooftops for a while.

He ignored the argument coming from the alley over as he ran across the roof and leapt over the laneway openings without much issue even though they were wide enough for shops to receive their shipments.

He only bothered to pause to breathe when his ribs and throat were screaming at him, but the screaming from behind him couldn't be heard any more. He stumbled to a stop at the edge of one of the heir fashion department stores and let himself sag to his knees.

The need to go back and deal with the criminals was less immediately pressing in the cool peace of the Gotham night.

The air soothed the burn of his throat and ribs as he tried to catch his breath.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," Danny murmured as he swallowed the panic that leapt into his throat like acid reflux. He didn't have to turn to look behind to see which of the Bats had found him. He recognized the voice.

Red Robin sat down next to him and crossed his legs, "You know, most people I find on roofs aren't okay. I won't judge you if you're having a hard time. I'm happy to listen."

Danny shook his head, "No, I'm good,"

The vigilante didn't look convinced but said nothing. Danny watched his cape flutter softly in the breeze as it wrapped around Red Robin and fluttered in front of him.

The halfa took a deep breath and let it out slowly, "I was just trying to hide from some thugs causing shit in an alley, and maybe I overreacted."

“So it was thugs in an alley, I see,” Red Robin grinned as he bumped his shoulder against Tommy’s, “And you aren’t suicidal?”

“Nah, I don’t have any suicidal thoughts or plans,” Tommy shrugged, “I mean, trauma? Sure. Flashbacks? Yeah, and I’ve done a lot of work on myself to deal with that. It’s still there, and that’s okay. Not the reason I’m up here, though, that would be the dudes in the alley trying to boost their getaway vehicle, and I didn’t want them to find me, so, rooftops.”

“Rooftops,” Tim agreed.

“You aren’t going to go stop them?” Tommy tilted his head curiously as his breathing settled.

Good. He really had been running.

Dumpster Tommy hadn’t been in distress.

The vigilante shrugged, “Eh, the other Bats will take care of it. I figured I’d catch up with you.”

It was him.

He was the Bat.

Tim had dealt with Malcone’s mobster’s on the way over.

“How've you been? I haven’t seen you since you were trying to pass off that gunshot wound so you didn’t freak that kid out,” Tim asked as he leaned back on his hands.

“Pretty okay, I guess,” Tommy hummed. The homeless teen scratched his chin, “Healing was a pain in the ass, but other than that, things have been pretty good? I mean, lately it’s been a rollercoaster, but overall, I’m having a blast in Gotham actually.”

“And how’s living on the streets been? And you don’t have to hold back anything either. I can handle it,” Tim teased lightly.

“In my case, being homeless is probably the best thing for me,” The teenager said without any micro-expression that would indicate being unhappy or uncomfortable with his situation, “It’s not for everyone, but I think it’s for me, you know?”

“I can get that. So long as you’re alright,” Tim frowned. He fished a protein bar from his belt and handed it over to Tommy, “If that ever changes, we’ll help you, you know. No matter what’s going on. I can get you some places and people to go to to get you off the streets.”

“No thanks, Red Robin, foster system is not a place I want to be. Wouldn’t really turn out well for me.”

“I can’t force you to access those services, but if you go, I promise you, it’ll work out just fine for you,” Tim promised. The kind, determined face that smiled so easily through his pain to make sure a kid felt safe enough to leave with them flashed in his head. He knew that Tommy had experienced things that would have jaded so many others, and, yet, still walked around with such a kind heart after experiencing all that he had, whatever it may have been.

“Nah, no thanks. I have no interest in being fostered or adopted,” Tommy denied with a chuckle. He pushed Tim’s shoulder teasingly with a lop-sided grin, “ Plus? I’m old enough where it’s entirely my choice where I live according to federal law.”

“You know what? Fair enough, but if you ever need anything, let me know.”

Danny couldn’t help the amused snickering that escaped his chest, “Uh huh, sure, thanks.”

Red Robin frowned even as he pulled out a scrap of paper, scribbled a number to an untraceable burner phone down, and offered it to the teen, “I am being fully serious, Dumpster. Call me if you need something.”

Danny looked at the little strip of paper cautiously. He took it slowly as he carefully asked, “How do you know my name?”

“Jesse. She talked about you.”

“Ah, that makes sense,” He said as he kept his eyes on the hero.

Red Robin wasn’t that bad to be around.

Just the same as Nightwing, the hero let him leave afterwards with no strings attached.

All Red Robin insisted on was hanging out until Danny was ready to climb down with him. That was fine so long as Red Robin was willing to wait until Danny’s legs stopped being jello.

He was, and he spent that time waiting with Danny showing him stupid videos of Nightwing acrobatic fails that he definitely didn’t hack the traffic cameras to get.

Kirk Langstrom had stumbled into a clinic in the Narrows where a nurse had come to help him inside after he entered their doors.

Scans taken after Kirk collapsed on the nurse in the middle of the entrance and was transferred as soon as power returned to the area to a hospital showed that he had some fractures, soft tissue damage, a concussion, and ruptured eardrums.

When he eventually regained consciousness, Kirk was able to write down answers to medical staffs' questions, but remained unable to hear them even as his self-made-mutation worked to heal him as quickly as possible.

By the time he left the hospital, tests showed his hearing, despite healing structurally, remained severely damaged.

His information entered the hospital's systems too late for the Bats to intercept him at the hospital.

He'd long been discharged.

# dumpster diving isn't exactly an Olympic sport, nor did anyone exactly go dumpster diving, but that is neither here nor there

Danny picked a chain store that wouldn’t necessarily notice that clothes they hadn’t unpacked from their boxes were missing and immediately assume that it was a theft.

Of course, the fact that Danny was phasing them from the boxes without ever opening them meant that the original tape on the boxes wasn’t disturbed and, therefore, wouldn’t raise any suspicion as theft.

Just another fucked up high-fashion chain with a mistake in the number of items shipped. That’s all it would amount to, and Danny was fine with that.

Danny stuffed the clothes into his bag without making himself or the clothing visible, and left the store two hours after he arrived.

The only thing he bothered with once he was blocks away from the store he’d stolen from was phasing his shoes into a flaming barrel as discreetly as he could while waving to Kelly who was tending to the fire itself for the night.

Danny made it to Lav’s apartment a little after ten at night. He hadn’t been expecting her to be home, let alone answer dressed so clearly for work and not a comfortable night in.

She wasn’t home most nights, but she had said that Danny had better swing by. He figured she’d be in.

“I… can come back later if you’re headed out,” Danny offered even as she pulled him in and slammed the door behind him.

“Actually, no, *we* are headed out,” Lavender declared.

Danny scrunched his nose as he pushed his shoes off, “Ew, being social on purpose. Gross.”

She gripped his jaw with both hands and tilted his head up and side to side. She looked over the harsh bruising around his neck, “Jesus christ, you weren’t kidding about this. Okay, so, Matilda said she had one wide enough. She’s working tonight, so I offered to work in house at the club. Two birds, one stone, and told her you’d be by my place to pick it up soon.”

Lavender released him when she was reluctantly satisfied (if Danny could even call it that) with the state of his neck. The scowl on her face really did look threatening with the way she blended out the sharp cuts in her eye shadow and dusted her face with enough highlighter that Kitty would be jealous, but Danny knew that the lighting at work would really make her features pop.

“Oh, sure, okay. How’s she doing?” Danny asked as he adjusted the way his sweater rubbed against his neck. He walked in and sat down on the couch as he squirmed to get his backpack off.

Lavender didn’t pay him much mind after letting him go, and instead opted to return to the bathroom. He could see her fiddling with some earrings through the door. Considering the tank top and leggings, Danny figured either she hadn’t decided between outfits or was waiting on him to arrive before putting the effort in to get dressed.

He didn’t blame her. Some of those outfits really weren’t the most comfortable things. He had no idea how Lavender could stand to wear some of the outfits. He didn't really get it, but that was fine. He wasn’t the one wearing skin-tight vinyl mini skirts.

“Good, but you can ask her yourself. She told me to take the late night shift and bring you along to see her since you were swinging by anyways. Something about not seeing you during the day enough and not working the streets enough to see you during the hours you're moving around instead of napping in the alleys.”

“Listen, I may be old enough to decide how I live my life, but I am pretty fucking sure I can’t go in a casino-slash-club,” Danny snarked as he pulled the clothes out of his bag and chucked them onto the cushions in front of him.

“Old enough to be on the streets, old enough to enter,” Lav snarked back as she looked over in time to see Dumpster tossing clothing to the other side of her beat up sofa. Her brows twisted in confusion, “What the fuck are you doing?!”

“I told you,” Tommy hummed lightly as he pitched a cute black mini skirt that seemed to be slit straight to the waist  onto the back of the sofa, “You complained about clients ruining your clothes, didn’t you?”

“I… yeah? But, dude, did you fucking buy me clothes?!”

“Sort of, yeah,” Tommy said as the sound of a zipper closing echoed in the living room. Tommy squirmed around in his sweater for a moment. Lavender watched the telltale motions of Dumpster putting the backpack back on underneath his sweater.

She shook her head as she walked over to the couch, “I know I say it's hard to make ends meet, but I can buy my own clothes, you little shit…” Lavender grumbled as she snacked a pink top. Her eyebrows raised when she saw the tag.

It wasn’t hard to see the little shit’s growing grin, “I know Tilly compensates your purchases for when you’re working in house, and offers a clothing bonus for out of house styles.”

“She hates that you call her Tilly,” Lavender murmured softly as she glanced over the hundreds of dollars of clothes on her couch, all balled up in the word’s worst pile, “What… the fuck.”

“I was uptown, what can I say?” Dumpster snorted.

“... You realize Imma wash these before I wear them, right?” Lavender asked as she pushed the pile over into the center cushion and began to rifle through it all.

Snacks just sat with his chin propped up on his hands and a shit-eating grin stretched across his stupid smug face, “But you’re going to wear them?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?!” Lavender deadpanned as she whipped a shirt at him, “You bring me this and ask if I’m going to wear it?! Of course I’m going to wear it!”

He just caught the shirt and laughed.

“Seriously, the stuff you find sometimes amazes me,” Lavender said as she tossed her braid back over her shoulder, “That store never lets anyone with an Alley accent in.”

“I mean, I wouldn’t know, but that doesn’t surprise me,” Dumpster snorted as she watched her sort through the clothes, “I’m only familiar with places refusing to serve me because I’m homeless.”

Lavender scowled as she listened, but the reality was something she could never deny. A lot of places in Gotham were shit holes despite being fancy, or even just a regular, working class shop.

Between the two of them, they kept a running list of stores and businesses they affectionately called the Dickhead Directory. The sheer amount of stores and fast food places that were on there just because Snacks was homeless wasn’t funny. Granted, lots of restaurants and stores were there solely because Lavender herself was clocked for being a prostitute by the staff or establishment (not even regarding the Alley Trash bit, just the fact that she was a “whore” and “ruining the welcoming atmosphere of our restaurant”).

So. Yeah.

Dickheads.

Personally, Lavender figured if all it took to ruin the ambiance of a restaurant was a crop top, a stiff breeze would also ruin the restaurant's ambience, but what did she know? She only created ambiance professionally.

Her friends texted her whenever they had a location to add to the list.

Tommy thought it was hilarious that the ladies and gents had a black list of their own.

"I still think the fact that you found these is fucking great. No clue why they'd throw them out though. There's nothing wrong with them at all," Lavender snorted, "Bunch of snobs."

"Who's to say, but they're yours now," Tommy grinned.

"You fuckin' bet they are," Lav nodded to him before jabbing her finger towards the bathroom, "Now go shower."

Tommy's eyebrows raised  stuck his tongue out, but did get off the couch and trudge his way over to the bathroom.

As Lavender stuffed her brand new expensive clothes into a laundry bag to wash the next day, she couldn't help but notice that Dumpster found himself new shoes.

Good for him.

Amazing what things Dumpster can find when he's digging around his native environment.

It wasn't the first time Danny followed Lavender through the alley door into the make-up room, nor was it the first time he mingle with the working girls. Granted, they were long used to him skirting out of the alleys that they wandered into with a John or Jane whenever the demands of the job were more immediate.

"Rosie!" Lavender snapped at the nurse as she leaned over a table into the mirror and painstakingly lined her eyes.

Her eyes barely flickered over her shoulder as she stared in the mirror, "What?! Girl, don't get pissed at me!"

"You let Dumpster walk out of that fucking clinic! With his neck looking like he went a round with Bane!" Lavender accused with her arms crossed and gripping her upper arms.

"I mean, he was fine." She dismissed as she finished up and turned around. Danny watched her eyes widen as she turned to look at him, "Fuckin' hell, what the fuck happened to you?!"

"Listen, it just looks bad," Danny shrugged.

"That's… fair, but damn, that bruising is harsh," Rosalina murmured, "No harsh swelling? No pain swallowing? No anything?"

"Nah, just annoying."

"You'll live," Rosie shrugged, "The other guy was worse off anyways. So many didn't make it at all, so a little bruising is something I think you can live with."

Danny swallowed as he kept his breathing slow, "No, I imagine a lot of people didn't make it."

*Shredded shrapnel lay in dunes around him in the pouring night of the junkyard. The smell of rust and blood and oil kept his mind running blankly at a hundred miles an hour.*

He could only imagine what kind of reproductions came from that kind of structural damage and spiking Gotham with a supernatural EMP.

"The statistics are still rolling in," Rosie hummed as she turned back to the mirror, "Not to be callus, but dying of relatively natural causes is better than being a Joker victim, those poor bastards."

Danny nodded along with the other ladies in the room.

*He did, technically, count as a natural cause of death, didn't he?*

It was… He didn't know exactly what to think about that conclusion.

**Danny:** A half-dead kid walks into a strip club

**Danny:** Less of a joke, more of a factual statement

**Danny:** A good chunk of my friends here are strippers

**Jazz:** I admit I'm scared to ask about the other chunks.

**Danny:** I mean

**Danny:** The fact that I have tried to avoid being absorbed into a gang only for a gang to absorb me anyways is not my fault

**Sam:** Damn it, Danny.

He let Gemma paint his nails a weird black that seemed to turn green when the light moved over them. It was a great way to pass the time in the back room while he waited for the all clear from Matilda's security detail that he wouldn't be taken down on sight.

Granted, most of them knew Tommy thanks to the sheer amount of time he came to bother Lavender, but still. It was nice to know he'd be considered a guest tonight. He didn't feel like being field tackled by a newer guard who "might see a twink among the sea of strippers and be corrupted forever" as if this wasn't Gotham where most of the Alley kids figured you were born corrupted and lived to pave a path straight to hell.

The idea itself was funny as hell though.

Danny wouldn't tell the kids that the path to hell was already paved. They just had to take the interstate to Amity Park, Illinois. Or Wisconsin. Either would work considering there were three portals.

*Was there four? Did Danny count?*

*Probably not. Danny never counted for much of anything. Not with his grades. Not with his failure. Not with his family. Not with his life.*

**Danny:** I'm not in the gang

**Danny:** But I think I'm in the gang

**Tucker:** You put your right foot in

**Tucker:** You put your right foot out

**Tucker:** You put your right foot in, and you tame some violent street kids who point guns at you the first time they met you

**Sam:** I will personally end you

**Tucker:** Listen to me

**Tucker:** The fact that Danny hokey pokey'd his way into a gang is hilarious

**Sam:** It's closer to taming animals, if we're being honest

**Jazz:** Now I can't think of anything else other than a bunch of bears doing the hokey pokey

**Jazz:** By the way, how much of a gang are the baby gang??

**Danny:** Uh

**Danny:** Well

**Danny:** What are your opinions on mob enforcers for drug lords?

**Danny:** Because these little shits apparently take it upon themselves to beat the shit out of rival criminal organizations

**Sam:** My kind of kids

**Danny:** Anyways, after getting choked out by the world's largest enjoyer of shrimp boils and also a rabid flying rat (I think it was both of them. You know, I'm not exactly sure any more), I got cornered by a rabid Latine preteen who threatened to kill the person that hurt me.

**Danny:** It was a whole thing

**Tucker:** "It was a whole thing"

**Tucker:** - Danny Fenton, circa 2014 trying to be cool, ripping a hole in the fabric of spacetime, dying, and failing to be cool ever since

**Danny:** I'll kill you

**Tucker:** You can try.

When Danny pulled his eyes from his phone, he found himself sitting across from a curvy lady with her face painted and highlighted to the gods, and even in the bright light of the backroom, the light ran across her dark, warm skin as if the room was shadowed. In a way, it was. Matilda's domain's always felt somewhat hushed, though it was all in the way she carried herself. She dominated every space she occupied.

It was probably why she was so successful, and how she'd been able to keep her business clean of outside scum.

"Hey, Tilly," Danny grinned cheekily.

"You're lucky you're a cutie, you little shit," Matilda shot back, "You're gonna need to explain to me why you need that wide of a collar before I hand it over."

"I fought Croc and the flying fucker, and I want the collar so the police don't stick their noses where it doesn't belong," Danny offered with a cocked eyebrow.

Matilda reached out and cuffed him easily.

"*You dumbfuck,* what do you take me for? An idiot?"

"It was worth a shot," Danny laughed with a bright grin even as he tried to duck out of the way.

# stripper outfits make for a fun time playing pool with a poster child

Chapter Notes

Hi, I am stressed, exhausted, and burnt out from irl things. Please don't be shocked if updates are spaced out for a lil bit. There's a lot going on currently.

The club wasn't as loud as Danny had been expecting. The weird mix of neon and heavy darkness of the lights created a weirdly encompassing feeling of security even as he made his way into the main parts of the club, feeling damn near naked after Tilly wrestled his backpack into Lav's locker and wrestled him into more club-appropriate clothes than his usual sweater three sizes bigger than what he strictly would need without his backpack and purse, and ripped-up, grime-stained jeans.

He did, however, draw the line at the mesh shirt Matilda had tried her best to convince him to wear, though. He had a strong feeling that wouldn't hide the scars that ripped across his torso, nor the freshly healed hole in his stomach. He stole one of Lavender's dark purple undershirts. Matilda didn't fight him on the compromise.

"Now, don't you cause shit tonight. Do what you want, but you watch your step. Don't make me watch it for you."

"And if I wanna fuck around with your guests?" Danny had teased.

Matilda had just rolled her eyes, handed over a silver-studded collar of supple black leather thick enough that it had covered his neck completely and told him to fuck off.

A shit-eating grin stretched across his face as he slid down the banister leading into the main floor of the club with a cheeky wink to Tilly's security detail and without a care in the world.

Tilly had told him to do whatever the hell he wanted.

He fully intended to.

How often did one get to party on the Club Owner's dime?

Not often.

Matilda was a hardass and a successful business owner for a reason.

Matilda held no pity in her eyes even as she watched the horrible bruising vanish under the cover of the leather. Hood's stance on the kid was clear, and if the kid wanted to have some fun, Matilda would allow it.

*"Something tells me the kid does more than I know, Matilda. Keep an eye on Dumpster."*

She would've done that anyways.

He bugged her enough that she didn't have much choice but to look at him with both of her fucking eyes. However, she could do that from her office tonight without having him sprawl on the couch and sass her the entire time with "Your office isn't *technically* the club, Tilly, and I came through the dressing room door, not through the club."

Brat.

Danny was more than content to lounge around watching men sweat in their desperation as thousands got gambled away in card games.

Watching all of them glare at him in return when the dealers allowed a shitty kid with carelessly messy hair held in place with hairspray, glimmering nails, and a mesh long sleeved shirt shadowed by the purple underneath stare them down with icicle eyes was just as rewarding

“You gonna play a round or two instead of starin’, Kid?” A man with ruby cufflinks huffed over his cards.

“Hmm, I don’t really feel like it. Just like watching you lose,” Danny hinted lightly.

The man in what was probably his late thirties glared, “You sayin’ I’m gonna lose?”

“I’m saying your poker face is so shit that you’re surrendering, but, essentially, it’s the same thing,” Danny shrugged slyly and pulled away from the dealer.

He moved on from that table listening to the sweet sweet sounds of everyone getting ready to devour the biggest asshole at the table. Not his problem.

He shouldn’t have tried to stonewall Danny on the sidewalk.

It was a bizarre mix, in Danny’s opinion. The club seemed to have average people just here for a good time mixed in with people who dressed up a little more, even including a few people in suits out having a good time.

It wasn't hard to figure out they were likely mob connections and members of crime families or other gangs. A year ago, Danny probably wouldn't be able to pick out who was what. Then again, another tip off was how the Ladies were reacting to patrons. The ones that got a regular amount of attention? Not important. Several of the back poker tables and a few sections beside the stages? Clearly very important. A mix of crowds for the pool tables. Likely a mix of mob enforcers and general criminals.

Matilda wouldn't have made him change if tonight was a night where a lot of regular street folk had come. She also wouldn't have let him have free range of the multi-floored club itself, or told him he could do whatever he wanted on either floor, be it club or casino.

It also explained Tilly asking Lavender to cover a later shift in house in exchange for bringing Danny for the collar. Tilly was a strategist and a business partner of Hood's for a reason, and Danny wasn't stupid enough to not understand that.

He kept his ear open for whatever it was that she might want to be in the know about.

"Mind if I join in?" Danny asked with a smirk as he approached one of the pool tables.

The sheer amount of men in bombers and trench coats cracked Danny right up, though he didn't let himself laugh.

"Ain't you a little young to get into places like these?" An older gentleman with grey and black hair asked as he lined up a shot.

"I mean," Danny shrugged, "Security hasn't stopped me yet, so I take it as permission."

“Careful, boy, that mouth might get you killed tonight,” The man with industrials glinting in his ears snorted.

“Aw, c’mon, Terry! There’s no one that scary in the house tonight,” A man with heavy five o’clock shadow and a trench coat chuckled, “Let the kid play a round. Better with us than causin’ a ruckus.”

“You know what, Matches? Fine, but if the staff gets pissed, it’s on you, buddy. I *like* this place,” Terry grumbled defensively as he slung the cue across his shoulders.

“That’s cause you like lookin’ at the girls they got here more than hangin’ with your buddies.”

“I see enough of your mugs at work, Jenkins, now shut up and shoot your shot,” Terry sneered.

Danny kept the snort safely suppressed even as a large hand clamped roughly on his shoulders. He looked up to see the harsh jawline defined by the harsher shadow of a three days over due, and clearly not in the way that would tell Danny he was just trying to grow it out.

“Don’t mind Terry, he’s just given’ ya a hard time. I’m Matches.”

“Dumpster,” Danny hummed, awkwardly patting the hand on his shoulder.

Danny watched Matches wink his way and line up a shot in the middle of listening to Jenkins brag about his shot. He sunk 4 balls before he missed a shot.

Terry cursed Matches out and chucked his cue at Danny. The teen couldn’t help but grin.

“Do you want me to take over?” Danny offered cheekily.

“If you don’t, I’m going to beat the shit out of Malone,” Terry growled and stomped off.

Matches just laughed.

Danny shook his head as he took his own aim, “I guess Terry was solids?”

“Yeah, now he’s just solidly pissed,” Jenkins snorted.

Danny smirked as he knocked his cue ball and watched it ricochet around the table like he’d done the couple times he’d ended up in Walker’s prison and needed something to do with the others so they didn’t kill him in the meantime.

Danny watched two of Terry’s balls sink with 4 left out before he could shoot for eight.

Danny let loose a tighter shot and caught Matches’ eyes as three more sank before he missed and passed his turn over.

“You’re better than Terry, that’s for sure,” Jenkins laughed as he stepped forwards.

“He, no Terry slander in my presence, I am merely an extension of his prowess tonight,” Danny smirked.

“Yeah, fuck off, kiddo’s my hands tonight,” Terry grumbled as he slammed back his beer and slung an arm around Danny’s shoulders.

“Pfft, Dumpster’s way better than you,” Jenkins snorted.

“Fuck you, least he has more style than you.”

“Listen, gentlemen,” Danny grinned as he watched Matches step up to shoot stripes, “You’re both shooting solids while Matches is trying to cream your asses. It looks like I’m doing better than either of you ever were against him.”

Danny watched Matches try and school his expression, only to leave familiar creases in his expression that scratched at the back of Danny’s brain even as Matches let out a ghost of a chuckle, “Dumpster’s right, ya know, I’m kicking your asses pretty badly.”

Danny  waved Terry’s hand from his shoulder. He moved around the table until he was standing in front of the cue ball. He watched Matches’ eyebrow go up as Danny aimed for the last stripe.

“Now, I’d say two on one is hardly fair…” Danny smirked as he let loose, and watched the stripe collide with the last solid, and sent both of them ricocheting around until the solid rolled into a center pocket, and the stripe crashed into the eight. Danny stood up straight and hung his arms from the cue as he slung it carelessly over his shoulders. The eight knocked into the border before it ever so slowly tilted over the edge into a corner, “... For you, anyways, Matches.”

“You’re pretty damn good, kid,” Matches hummed as he picked up the last ball left on the field. Stripes, of course, “Wanna go again? One on one this time?”

“Eh, I didn’t come to kick your friends out,” Danny shrugged.

“Fuck that. I need a drink,” Jenkins sniggered, “I haven’t seen someone steal a pool victory from Malone like that in a long fuckin’ time. I gotta see this shit go down. This is even better than Grundy beating the shit out of Man Bat.”

Danny paused as he helped Matches fish the balls free from the pockets. He dropped them into the rack in the middle of the table and tilted his head, “Excuse me, *who* beat the shit out of Man Bat?”

“Yeah, shocked me too,” Jenkins nodded flung a hand out in a dismissive wave, “Grundy’s been fucking quiet these past couple of months, but apparently it ain’t *Grundy* Grundy, if you catch my meaning.”

“I… really don’t think I do,” Danny shrugged, “Grundy *is* Grundy, you know, big, tall, zombie.”

“Nah, get this,” Jenkins leaned in and wrapped an arm around Danny’s shoulder as he spoke softly, “Not *Solomon* Grundy, someone *else.* Terry and me, we run in circles that work close with certain people, and we’re hearing from up the grapevine that there’s a Grundy Junior who beat the shit out of Man Bat for picking a fight he couldn’t win.”

*Grundy Junior.*

“A Junior in the mix?” Matches hummed thoughtfully, “Well, shit, that would explain the quiet, wouldn’t it?”

“People do love trying to sucker Grundy into their plans and bullshit. Never works out for them when they cross him, though,” Terry nodded along, “Guess that’s a family trait.”

“Do I even want to know how Grundy had a kid that went unknown for so long?” Matches asked as he took the rack off the table, leaving the balls perfectly set up to be broken by Dumpster.

Jenkins shook his head as he wandered off for a drink, “Absolutely fuckin’ not.”

“Either Grundy had a kid who no one knew about that died way way waaaaay back when, and Grundy only recently found and dug up the poor fucker, or Grundy found someone who was willing to fuck him. Or unwilling, but from the sounds of things, the relationship between Junior and Senior sis too good for somethin’ like that,” Terry huffed as he took a swig of his beer.

“Hey, man, I’ll take a zombie with some decency. Better than a lot of fucking creeps out there,” Danny hummed as he cracked his neck and broke the cluster.

“Amen,” Matches smirked, “How much of a junior is this Junior.”

“Big enough to royally fuck up an eight foot tall flying beast, so, I really don’t know. Big enough to do that, small enough to be a Daddy’s Boy?” Terry guessed.

That *motherfucker.*

Danny was going to bite Waylon.

Jenkins and Terry were definitely Waylon’s men, or, if not his men, than one of his closer associate’s men. It was poor taste and also suspicious as hell to ask, so Danny kept his mouth shut.

He had no idea who Matches was running with, but one thing was clear from the man’s Alley accent.

That man had too much neutrality in his accent to be from the Alley. Danny was hoping the guy had just moved when he was a little older, but there was no way that man was purely a lower class Gothamite. As long as he didn't cause shit for Danny, Danny would try not to cause shit for Matches. He was fun to beat at pool, though.

“Hey Tilly, I won some pool matches, teased some mobsters, and definitely didn’t sweat my ass off in these horrible leather pants all night. Can I please put my jeans back on now?”

“Get your sweaty, leather-wearing ass off my desk, you little shit.”

Danny smirked, "You're the one who squeezed me into these pants in the first place. Suffer."

# roguish times aloft in a sea of trashed homework

**Danny:** Instead of a shrimp boil, I'm going to boil Waylon.

**Jazz:** Um???

**Danny:** I did not squeeze my ass into leather pants just to be informed that Waylon has decided to spread the idea that Grundy has a kid

**Danny:** And that the kid beat Man Bat up.

**Jazz:** What??

**Sam:** ... Wait, did he not think you were Grundy's kid?

**Danny:** I am currently way more of Grundy's parent than he is mine

**Danny:** Not that anyone is getting adopted.

**Danny:** He's literally dead.

**Danny:** I am literally the king of the dead.

**Danny:** But no, I had to stand there

**Danny:** Sweating my ass off in leather pants and a mesh shirt

**Danny:** Hoping that Waylon's men didn't get informed about what "Junior" looked like

**Danny:** Mainly because I was kicking their friend's ass in pool, sooooo

**Danny:** But also because uhhhhh

**Danny:** How do you deal with accidentally becoming a Rogue?!

**Tucker:** Why are you like this

**Danny:** I ripped a hole between dimensions when I was fourteen and never looked back

**Danny:** So it's probably something to do with that

**Sam:** You know what?

**Sam:** I don't think dying did this.

**Sam:** I think you're just like that.

**Tucker:** I think dying just made it worse

**Danny:** Slander

**Jazz:** I mean, I'm taking Tucker's side on this.

**Danny:** Betrayal of the highest order

**Danny:** My own sister

**Jazz:** I watched you swallow a fork and take it from your stomach in the middle of the school yard.

**Jazz:** I am fully team Tucker.

**Danny:** I'd say that I disown you

**Danny:** However, you know

**Tucker:** Pftt

Danny decided against updating Matilda on the things he heard from the mobsters. She told him to have fun. Well, Danny figured holding off on spreading that information felt like fun for him.

If only the underground had thought the same.

It didn't take longer than a week for Danny to hear the whispers on the streets, especially in the few times that he camped out with some of the homeless clusters that had re-established themselves successfully.

Tommy Grundy, son of Solomon Grundy, Gotham's Undead Horror, beat the shit out of Man Bat.

Whether or not the news had spread *upwards* yet remained unseen.

The thought kinda haunted him, if he was being honest. No amount of getting comfortable in an alley next to, behind, or inside of dumpsters let him hide from the annoyance he currently had with Waylon.

It did, however, let him sulk in peace.

Right up until someone catapulted themselves into the dumpster, sliding between the lip of the dumpster and the closed lid with entirely too much speed.

Danny  cushioned himself as the trash bags shifted to accommodate the new person in the space.

“Don’t fuck with me tonight, B, I’m not in the mood,” The disgruntled voice grumbled lowly among the trash.

“Hi, Hood,” Danny whispered.

He felt the bags move quickly, and phased out in time for a fist to imbed itself in the bag behind Danny’s head.

He moved to the side, and emerged from the trash mound in front of Hood, “Sorry about that,” he mumbled.

“Jesus Christ, Snacks, I almost fucking killed you,” Hood sighed softly.

“Not even close,” The teen chuckled, “Hiding from Batman?”

“Yeah, let’s hope he doesn't use thermals. Don’t think there's nearly enough trash in here to avoid being found,” Jason whispered softly. He pulled his hand free of the bag and shook off the debris as he ruffled Tommy’s hair with his clean hand.

Tommy just hummed in acknowledgement even as he seemed to sink beneath the sea of garbage.

“Shit, kid, c’mon, don’t drown in here. That would suck,” Jason said under his breath. He carefully lifted the scrawny little shit up by the armpits a moment after he disappeared under the surface.

The chill of the night  air seemed to sink deeper and deeper into the dumpster and its content. He hoped it would be enough to fool Bruce.

Through the infrared vision of his helmet, Jay could see Snack’s tiny grin.

“What, you think drowning in trash is funny?”

“I think it’s funny that you think I would drown instead of suffocate,” Danny teased quietly even as he felt the thin layer of ice spread along the the bottom of the dumpster, creeping out from where he’d tapped his toe only to vanish after like the ice was never there, “How far behind was Batman?”

“Not far, so don’t use your voice at all. If he’s decided that the hill he wants to die on tonight is worth hunting me down, he’ll break out the good gear to listen for me,” Hood breathed.

“He creeps me out,” Danny admitted almost silently as he stayed as still as he could to avoid rustling any trash, “Why does he want you?”

“Best friend’s a meta who caught a couple of the planes that were flying into Gotham when the sky went dark,” Jay grumbled, “B found out. B’s pissed about his broken ‘No Metas’ rule.”

“Ah, sorry about that.”

“Eh, he’d be pissed at me for something else if not that, don’t worry,” Hood shrugged, “He’s a little pissed that things aren’t going his way right now. Got a missing kid that Man Bat took, top that off with whispers that the kid might have been connected to a Rogue that famously doesn’t like to be bothered for any reason, and he’s a little high strung at the moment.”

“I thought he was always high strung?” Tommy scrunched his nose as the slight sound of something hitting the ridge of the roof top above them brought a quick, heavy silence over the two of them.

Neither moved for what felt like forever.

Tommy was the one to wiggle out of Jason's arms and break the silence by darting up and out.. The two of them scrambled out of the dumpster with a vigor that didn't really fit having just escaped Batman, but Tommy’s anxiety at the thought of staying in the dumpster was contagious.

“Did you hide your motorcycle anywhere?” Tommy hissed as he sprinted down the alleys with as much familiarity as it took for Jason to follow him without flinching.

“No. I didn’t have it tonight,” Jason hissed as he slid beneath a broken set of fire ladders.

“Good.”

Tommy gave him no reprieve from the insane sprint through alleyways and lanes. The kid slid in and out of cover like he belonged to the very shadows.

Jason had to admit that he was impressed. He knew exactly how to move his body to do the same from years of practice.

That thought only made him concerned. As far as he was aware, Tommy hadn't actually been on the streets that long.

What did Lavender say, less than a year?

So why did Tommy know exactly how to hide in urban camouflage?

Jason didn't like the answer, but he could appreciate how he didn't have to worry about being caught because Dumpster lagged behind.

No, he was the one that was currently causing the risk of being caught.

Fuck, this kid was fast. It felt like he was trying to race Bizarro.

Danny didn't let up even as slipped into the first floor of an abandoned apartment building.

It had been fixed after the fire. No one had moved back in due to issues with the electricity that put the building at risk of burning to the ground due to the shoddy job.

It left Danny standing in the middle of a barren living room, panting heavily and watching behind him as the bulky frame of Red Hood had wiggled in through the same window he had.

Despite having generally the same overall width at the moment, Danny could admit that it was kind of funny to see just how much Hood was struggling.

It was probably the backpack. Even with the items inside (though no longer laden down by the excess clothes he had taken form him and Lavender), backpacks still had more give than bone.

“Damn, kid, you’re speedy,” Hood snickered.

“No, I thought he was Arsenal now,” Danny sassed as he rubbed the sweet from his face with a sleeve.

“Ew, kid, you were covered in trash thirty minutes ago.”

“I, for your information, am always covered in trash,” Danny sassed back. It wasn’t quite true, but he did spend most days and nights tucked against dumpsters.

*The disgusting feeling of the contents of Casper high’s garbage felt infused with his skin. He didn’t have the energy to shower. He just laid on the floor, looking at the stairs glued with Fenton Glue to the ceiling.*

*He’d regret not dragging him and his bruises to the shower.*

“I will literally buy you a gym membership if you let me,” Hood swore as he pulled off his glove. He dug through his interior coat pocket and fished out a few disinfectant wipes he’d stashed from when Roy had come over sick with a cold months ago and never bothered taking out.

Tommy just made a face at them. Hood knew chucking disinfectant at the kid was rude, but…

“Just don’t rub your eyes without cleaning your hands.”

“Dude, I’m not a kid,” Dumpster said as he rolled his eyes but ripped the package open anyways.

Hood nodded, “Yeah, bud, I know you aren’t. No one’s a kid if they’re homeless in the Alley.”

“Nice that at least one hero gets it,” Danny snorted, “Red Robin told me that if I wanted to trust the system, it would take care of me, and that he’d make sure of it. Buster, I’m not fucking interested. I’m old enough to do whatever I want with my life, thanks.”

Beneath Jason’s helmet, a smirk creeped across his face.

The little firecracker reminded him a lot of Roy.

Danny was going to give Waylon rancid shrimp.

Danny raided Lavender’s shower and let himself into Devin’s room with little regard for whatever the kid was actually hiding in there.

Guns? Probably.

Knives? Definitely.

Danny just hunted down Devin’s school bag and brought it out to the living room. Danny dumped the papers out on the floor and sighed.

**Tommy:** Hey what the fuck is Dev doing tonight hes not home

Danny tapped out a message on Tucker's server and set his phone up on the coffee table.

**Danny:** Hey any of you free to bug for a bit?

**Danny:** I'm trying to go through my uhhhhhhh baby gang student????

**Danny:** Their schoolwork

**Danny:** How the fuck do I teach a kid

**Tucker:** I gotta see this.

The soft chimes of the server's video call rang out amidst Lav's living room. Danny tapped the screen again and answered with a grin as Tucker sat back with his headset on.

"Are you playing fucking Doom," Danny snickered.

"Kicking Sam's butt as we speak," Tucker winked.

"Not on your life, punk," Sam sassed as her face appeared beside Tucker a moment later.

"Sam! Good to see you!" Danny beamed as he tried to shuffle the papers into piles by their different subjects.

"You two idiots couldn't plan your way out of a paper bag," Sam smirked as she leaned back and kicked her combat boots up onto her desk.

"Yes, I could," Tucker argued.

“If you ate it, maybe.”

“I hate you, Sam.”

Danny snickered as he shuffled through the paper piles, “So it looks like they’re doing… alright, sort of, in English. Math is… actually really good, probably because Devin is the right hand of the Alley kids and an active member of a fucking crime family with a very active role.”

“Start ‘em young,” Tucker nodded approvingly.

“I know you mean math,” Sam said slowly, “But I can’t stop imagining you starting a little child mafia of your own.”

Danny snickered. His phone dinged and the text notification appeared at the top of the screen.

**Lavender:** Moving crates or something idk. Something not dangerous or attention grabbing tho

Considering Red Hood held him aloft in the trash like fucking Simba as Batman jumped over them, Danny figured that was an accurate statement.

**Tommy:** Mafioso Jr.

**Lavender:** Still a mafioso

**Tommy:** Pfft

“Listen, I can’t teach him what I don’t know,” Danny sassed.

“Holy fuck, please, for the love of whatever the fuck is out there, do not teach that kid how to die young.”

“Well, Tucker, considering he’s apparently out right now doing gang shit, I’d say I can scooch right on past that lesson,” Danny smirked, “What else, eco-terrorism?”

“What about interdimensional warfare?”

“If you were standing right in front of me, I would trip you,” Danny deadpanned as he flipped  Sam off and skimmed the kid’s geography homework. No worries there; Dev had solid B’s.

“Oh, damn,” Tucker sassed, “We’re gonna have to start with physics. Hard to trip someone when they’re not even moving.”

“What’s it like,” Danny said pleasantly as he looked at his phone screen, “To live, every moment of every single day, with the knowledge that I have an endless amount of access to your fucking disgusting meat gummies.”

“Torture, Danny, Just torture,” Tucker sighed and slumped back in his chair even as his tone remained airy and pleasant.

# You could learn my solitude if you listened to what you caused, but your own screams are louder. I am here for you regardless.

At some point, Danny was pretty sure Sam and Tucker had begun taking notes.

*"At some point"* was about three hours ago.

"So, luckily? I guess? Devin fucking sucks at science, and that's where I can really help him out. Bio too, not that they have that much. He's not in high school currently."

"But he will be," Tucker hummed as he scrolled through the pictures Danny had sent, "And from the sounds of things, his work isn't going to hold up. It looks like the teacher's just pushing the kids through, or at least this one."

"Do you know where they're going?" Sam asked with a raised brow.

Danny frowned and scratched his chin, "Well, I don't know if they're even going to go, to be honest. I think that's the plan, but whether or not he's going to graduate? No clue."

"If he pulls his grades around, he could always fight for a Wayne Scholarship. Well, actually, I think it got changed, like, *years* ago to the Jason Todd Memorial Scholarship, but my point stands," Tucker hummed as he slid to the other side of his desk. The sounds of Tucker's noisy keyboard filled the call as he swapped from Doom. The white light of his secondary screen filled the dark of his room as he scrolled through some school's website.

"Which school is that for?" Danny perked up with furrowed brows.

"Gotham Academy," Tucker smirked, "They have a very generous fund that goes anywhere between minor and major sponsorship. Not how they describe it, but, essentially, the same thing. They have tuition assistance, tuition coverage, and full rides."

Sam didn't even try to stop the smirk from spreading across her face, "You guys thinking what I'm thinking?"

Mirrored smirks made their way across Danny and Tucker's faces.

"We tutor the shit out of Devin, shape them up, and get them to ace the application," Tucker began.

"Include whoever else from the Baby Gang wants the tutoring," Danny continued.

"And send the *Street Kid Mafia* to Gotham Academy," Sam cackled, "Burn high society to the fucking ground!"

"I mean, Gotham Academy has taken on underprivileged kids in the past," Tucker said lightly, "However…"

"Probably not the entire upper echelon of a junior crime organization from the Alley," Danny grinned as he looked at his best friends, "How hard would it be to team up on this one?"

"I got you covered for English. Apparently they have different things you can specialize in. If someone wants to do a Business Specialization, I could *definitely* help out with that," Sam shrugged as she fully logged out of Doom and turned her full attention to the note document she had pulled up. It didn't take much for Danny to figure out her and Tucker were on the same document when her face soured at something in front o her, "Not a fucking nerd."

"That's exactly what a nerd would say," Tucker dismissed as he reached down and fished an energy drink from the drawers of his desk, "And no worries, I got math for sure. Since becoming a Pharaoh, I've definitely become a bit of a history buff, so that too. Also any computer technology. I'll leave the advanced engineering to you."

“Gee, thanks, Tuck,” Danny deadpanned, “But I definitely have the Sciences down pat. Not to toot our horns, but considering the crap we’ve delt with, we may be slightly overqualified for teaching some of these subjects.”

“I mean,” Tucker considered for a moment before he continued, “Most teenagers aren’t doing advanced calculations for intertemporal travel or interdimensional travel in between writing poetry fighting a dickhead on a motorcycle. So, probably, yeah.”

Danny didn’t really know what to do with himself after cleaning up Dev’s papers. He just stacked the papers back into the kid’s backpack, sat it on the coffee table, and turned off the lights in the living room so he wouldn’t drive the electricity bill up any higher than he already did.

Lavender got home first and didn’t even wave at him. She marched straight to the bathroom. When she emerged afterwards, with dripping hair and pajamas, she found herself back tracking to the living room.

“Did you fuckin’ work on tha’ crap all night?!”

“Yep, mostly,” Danny shrugged as he looked up from his phone.

“Did you even fucking sleep?” She huffed as she made her way past Tommy to her room.

“Not at all. Hey, I’m gonna be chatting with Devin.”

“Got it, headphones,” Lavender grunted as she vanished behind her creaky bedroom door.

“Come on,” Danny chuckled, “It won't be that bad.”

Devin trudged through the door at ten with the morning sun streaming through windows that were usually closed because both him and his sister were night owls.

Their hand creeped towards his back even as familiar chuckles started up in the kitchen.

Cold omelets sat on the counter, and a smug looking Tommy stood on the other side with his arms propped up.

“Morning, kid,” Dumpster grinned, “Have a seat, we gotta chat.”

“Can I at least fuckin’ eat?” Dev sassed even as they sat down and pulled their hat free from their messy hair.

“Sure, knock yourself out,” Danny smiled as he took a bite of his own food.

“Since when did we have eggs?” Devin asked as he shoveled the omelet into his mouth.

“Picked some up on the way over,” Danny lied. He’d made a trip to the convenience store when Lavender had started snoring, “When’s school starting for you?”

“Why do you want to talk about school this early in the morning?” Devin huffed and tugged at his thick black hair in frustration. He cursed around the last chunks of his omelet, “You fucking went through my shit?!”

“Because I’m going to tutor you,” Danny said plainly, “And I’m going to get you into Gotham Academy.”

The silence sat in the kitchen for a moment as Danny watched Devin swallow the information.

“What… the *fuck do you mean* you’re gonna *send me* to that *rich-ass motherfuckin’ prick-filled school?!* And like *hell* you’re gonna *tutor me in anything!”* Devin screeched as he pitched his plate through the air.

Danny caught it long before it crashed, but didn’t otherwise physically react to the thrown object or the screaming. He just let Devin work through it until he took a breath.

“You going to sit there and throw things at me again? Or do you want me to keep you from going to your shitty school that you hate so much that your sister is iffy on getting you support because you’ll pull shit like this?” Danny asked plainly.

Was it a little mean? Yes.

Devin would kill him if he ever babied him.

He watched the anger slowly flood from Devin’s face and leave behind an unsure expression as Devin looked at Snack’s blank, emotionless expression. Tough night or no, Tommy didn’t ever need that kind of treatment. Even without the creepy emptiness in Snack’s face, Dev would still feel horrible. It sent chills down Devin’s spine to see Tommy’s bright blue eyes dig into his soul in the dim light of the apartment.

“You’re serious.”

“I am,” Danny shrugged as he set the plate back down between them, “You’re not going to make it the way the teacher’s been giving you grades. The first time I looked, you were kinda doing half-decent. When I actually looked at what you were submitting? Kid, you’ll flunk it.”

“You flunked out yourself, so what gives you the right to boss me around, huh?”

“You and I both know I’m not here because I flunked out, but, to be honest with you, yeah. I was flunking hard, but trust me when I say that I’m ready to get you into Gotham Academy, and I’ve got some friends who can pick up where I can’t whenever it comes to teaching.”

“Why just send me?” Devin asked as he scrunched his nose.

Danny smirked, “Eh, the plan was to send most of the Alley Kids, actually. Whoever could get in, and aim for full rides.”

Devin could feel his face morph into *“Are you fucking kidding me?”*

Before he could even say it, Tommy cut him off.

“What do you think, wanna try it out?”

“Wait… *how the fuck did you catch that plate?!”*

Lavender cracked her eyes open to the heavily muffled sounds of angry screeching. She adjusted her earplugs and rolled over.

She had told him it wouldn’t go well.

When Tommy left the apartment, Devin had already passed the word on to the others that:

1 - Snacks had come up with some crazy scheme to send them to the best school in Gotham, and if they put a lot of effort in, it just might work.

2 - Devin had fucked up, and threw a plate at Snack's head which the older teen had caught without a flinch right before it hit his face.

With Duke in the middle of recovery, the Waynes shifted their routines a bit to more efficiently cover for their only day-time hero. Damian in particular had seemed to warm a bit to their recovering family member..

Tim figured it was the stress.

As in, the same stress that had Damian and Bruce continuing their bizarre standoff.

Bruce let Damian back down into the cave. The Robin's grounding order was lifted.

That meant the return to Damian training behind Tim on the mats while he worked, and Tim found himself not minding the company.

It was weird how much he kinda missed the little shit, but as long as Damian had no interest in stopping him from working on a drug case, he didn't care much. He just wanted to figured out what the fuck was going on with the weird sub-strains that seemed to be causing bouts of mania that had people running directly for things they would otherwise, or should otherwise, fear in a way that had proven to be distinctly off from the normal fearlessness that users might typically experience.

“Damian?” Bruce’s voice echoed across the platform.

Tim froze on the chair where he was curled up like a goddamn shrimp looking over evidence.

“Do you have a moment?”

Tim could hear the sounds of Damian’s feet on the mat coming to a stop.

*Did Bruce not see him in the chair?*

Tim didn’t move.

“Are you going to dismiss me?” Damian’s scathing tone bit through the slight chill of the cave.

“No,” Bruce admitted. Tim could hear him take a seat on the mat, “I came to listen. You’re right. I haven’t been fair to you.”

“To *me?”* Damian asked carefully with a deceptively light tone. It fooled no one, “Father, I have come here, and I have changed my entire way of life, correct?”

“You did, and I’m proud of you for that. I know it’s not easy. I watched you struggle with it, and I know I missed a lot of your growth when I was stuck in time.”

Tim knew too.

Tim knew *exactly* what kind of struggles Damian was left dealing with. He'd been left to a family that was barely pieced back together. Dick was freshly back into the fold. Tim was freshly considered fully healed from the damage he'd taken from Bruce's fallout with Jason.

*Tim was freshly thrown out of the mantle. Tim was walking away from multiple murder attempts per day that no one else had to deal with but him. Tim was freshly considered insane by his older brother, and demonized by his very own replacement.*

*Tim had been freshly hiding everything for Damian's sake.*

"Before that, you made it explicitly clear, in no uncertain terms, that everyone you take into your home is a member of this family," Damian's scowling undertone was missing. His tone was bland, "Richard built on that premise in the years you were absent."

Bruce firmly insisted, "And I stand by that sentiment."

"No, you do not. Todd did not walk away. Todd died in the line of duty. Todd came back, and in the face of everything, received none of the care you offered to me."

Tim kept his breathing steady even as he gripped the edge of the desk. He forced himself to stay as still as possible as he overheard the answers he'd wanted to know, but had never asked in an attempt to respect Damian's space.

Tim felt like he was intruding, but to announce himself to Bruce now felt like it would ruin Damian's discussion.

But Damian hadn't said anything.

"It was different."

“How? What was different in regards to Todd? He tried to kill Drake? He was a criminal? Had ties to the League? Was a murderer?” Damian pushed scathingly, “Need I spell it out for you that I fall into each category as well?”

“You were a child.”

“As was Todd,” The Demon shut down harshly.

Tim could cut the tension with his bo-staff, never mind a fucking knife.

It was hard to imagine Bruce just sitting on the mats listening, but Tim knew damn well the man had yet to move.

“Jason Peter Todd was a child who, regardless of whatever morals *you* have standing issue with, was trained by the League at some point post the period of his resurrection. He has come to benefit Gotham. He *has* benefited Gotham. He respects many of the rules that you are incapable of putting in place as you are not Gotham’s overlord.”

“Jason is a Crime Lord.”

“In spite of it all, Todd has made his stances very clear, and if Todd can be amicable, you have no reason to continue your feud whilst whining that he won’t follow your ways.”

“Damian,” Bruce began.

“You *said* you would *listen,”* Damian snapped back.

Tim’s heartbeat leapt in his chest as he listened to Robin's tone darken.

“I… You’re right, I did say I would listen. Please, finish.”

Damian scoffed, and Tim knew the assassin was crossing his arms like he’d done a million times before.

“Do you not realize that I had more blood on my hands by the time I was five then Todd did by the time he returned to Gotham?”

“You were a child!”

“I was an intricately educated and trained child,” Damian countered, “I knew exactly what I was doing, regardless of what morals you feel I was wronged by. I understood exactly what I was doing when I slit my trainer’s throat for disrespecting me when I was three. I knew exactly what I was doing whenever I shed blood, be it fatal or non-fatal.”

Tim sat fifty feet away, hidden in a chair that was entirely too big for him, but had long-since developed an impression of him from the sheer amount of time he put into solving cases. He had to wonder what Bruce would say if the reports of his time within the League of Assassins were accurate in comparison to what he submitted to the records.

“So, Father, tell me this: Do you stand by those you take in being family?”

“Of course!

“Is Todd a member of this family?”

“I, yes, Damian.”

“Do you understand why I wonder if you will throw me out, Father?”

Tim wondered the very same, and in that moment, it felt like Damian was right behind him as opposed to fifty feet.

When Bruce finally left, the cave held a heavy silence. It took a little too long for Tim to finally let go of the desk. Tim fought the breath that found itself stuck in his chest.

His chair whipped around quickly as he reached back out for the keyboard.

Damian stared down at him.

“Drake,” He acknowledged.

“Damian,” Tim began carefully, “I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“I know, and I… appreciate it,” Damian said as he stood up straight.

Tim took a second slow, measured breath, “I’m sorry I didn’t realize what was going on between you and Bruce,” He said as he eased himself up from the chair, “I’ll… give you some time to decompress.”

He moved towards the stairs with less caution then he probably should.

A slender hand wrapped itself around his wrist and pulled him to a stop.

Neither person attempted to fill the silence except the bats that rustled occasionally.

“Thank you, Drake,” Damian intoned beneath the quiet, “I did not understand before. I believe I do now.”

Tim turned his shoulders and looked back at his younger brother, “I didn’t do anything.”

“We both know that sentiment is false,” Damian scoffed with scowl.

“Yeah, well,” Tim said awkwardly as he turned back around, “Your welcome, I guess.”

As Damian’s fingers slid down from around his wrist, Tim fled the Bat Cave and made his way up to his room.

He shut the door behind him and brought a shaking hand to his face.

His fingers were wet.

He didn’t expect the confrontation, for both Bruce and himself, to not end in a stressful argument.

He hadn’t expected an apology.

In the end, Steph found herself dragging Babs out alongside her and Cass, partly because they could both use the time off, but partly because there was no way Duke wouldn't vomit all over them at the assault, even with him almost recovered from his concussion.

"I definitely needed this concert," Steph sighed dramatically as she stuffed the latest Ember shirt into the backpack on Bab's chair.

"While I don't really have a strong preference for this artist, I'm with you on the 'needing a fucking break' bit," Barbara groaned as she cracked her neck.

Cass gave a solemn nod of her own as she tugged the teal shirt over her head and cracked glow sticks for the three of them.

Steph took hers with a big smile as she waved down one of the security guards, "I know everyone's super busy, but is there someone who could take us to accessible seating?"

"Did… you already plan for me to come?" Bab's asked with a smile.

"Listen, I love my best friend, but Bi Disaster or no Bi Disaster, sometimes you just need some girl time," Steph smirked.

# If a light at the end of the tunnel is needed to make your way out, explain to me all those who never needed a hero's hope

*Danny stopped flinching years ago when things were pitched at him. It was nothing new if it had been happening since kindergarten. When Dash had started throwing punches, both expected and unexpected, he'd started flinching again.*

*When his dad got close enough to throw his first punch, Danny realized he hadn't flinched so hard in his life. The stars above stayed where they'd been glued all those years ago. When his father had claimed that his glue would outlast anything, Danny didn't think that included being loved.*

There were places in Gotham people just didn't go if they could avoid it. Too risky. Too dangerous.

*You can stay. You don't have to run. He gave you a way out.*

It was a little like the Zone, but like with the Zone, Danny had long since gotten used to being in places he probably shouldn't.

It had become his, and existing in a space both welcoming and dangerous like Gotham was like walking through the Ghost Portal in his parents' lab. Most people didn't, wouldn't, go through such a thing. He did. He went all the time.

*You can go back. There's always that.*

The horrible buildings that basically screamed to be left alone and empty didn't deter Danny anymore than Fright Knight did. That was to say, Danny had a respectful cation towards those locations, but didn't pretend like they didn't exist.

Danny was more than happy to spend the day skipping out on sleep and wandering Gotham. He checked in with some of the homeless settlements and made sure people didn't think he was dead. He followed up on the list of no-go places collected in his phone.

*I can never go back. They'll know. He'll know.*

He collected any built-up ambient ectoplasm he could find as he made his way through Gotham.

He snuck into a gym and showered. The gym's terrible soap that they offered smelled vaguely disgusting underneath the weird pomegranate-mint it tried to be.

He swung by a store and bought way too much shrimp and spices before he made his way to the Reservoir.

*Despite the sheer amount of times Danny had ever been stuffed into the tiny space of a locker, underneath the overbearing weight of his father, he wanted nothing more than to be trapped back in the dark space he'd spent hours and hours trying to escape.*

**Danny:** Hey

**Danny:** Hey Tuck

**Danny:** I got a question for you

**Tucker:** That would explain the DM, yes

**Danny:** Could you hunt someone for me?

**Tucker:** Always

**Danny:** I've got a bone to pick with

**Danny:** My guy, damn

**Danny:** You didn't even let me explain

**Tucker:** I've done more for less explanation

**Danny:** You've got me there

**Danny:** Tell me who this asshat runs with

**Tucker:** Bitch, I'll tell you who he went to fucking prom with

The dampness of the sewers would never change, not that Danny wanted it to.

The moss that consumed the outer walls closest to Ivy's territory seemed to drip down the wall.

"See you next time," He grinned lazily as he left the last of it behind in favour of the dark tunnels. It wasn't hard to track down Waylon's territory. The writing on the wall wasn't English, it was gouges placed in brick as the scars of countless scraps filled the tunnels more and more until Danny knew he'd long passed the territory where Grundy and others tended to intrude on every once in a while.

He took no issue with the sounds ahead of him as he walked down the grate. He pushed his way through the brick to keep out of sight of Waylon as the tunnel broke out into a massive junction that had been taken over.

Platforms bolted themselves in place above bricks that held Waylon's hoard. Danny watched Waylon hand out orders to men that looked like they were terrified Waylon would lash out at

them, and could only hold in his own laughter at the idea that Waylon worked from home.

The silent stress that seemed to fill the air as Waylon's underlings went about their business was something Danny starkly ignored. He made his way through the semi-cluttered space filled with crates he had no interest in peeking into, and phased back into existence in the middle of sitting down on a ratty, but very comfortable couch chair.

He'd made it home unlike Grundy. To Grundy, the sewers were already home.

Waylon ripped around with more violence than his workers were ready for. The wave of people diving out of the way and otherwise scattering was something he didn't care about because *Grundy's pest was sitting in his fucking chair.*

*"When the fuck did you get here?"*

Tommy grinned as he crossed his legs and shoved his hands in the middle of his lap with a stupid little shrug.

"Do I look like I have a watch?"

"I know you have a fucking phone, so yes," Waylon rumbled as he strode across the platform.

"Maybe," Tommy snickered. He tilted his head back so he could keep eye contact with the behemoth. He leaned over to peer past the meta, and looked at his henchman scattered and looking on in horror, "You busy?"

Waylon raised a scaled brow, "What do you think?"

"I think you owe me a fucking boil."

Waylon snorted and poked the brat in the forehead, “I told ya you need to bring the shit, and then, sure, we can have a boil.”

Waylon watched the smirk grow across the kid’s face as he squirmed around in his sweater. Tommy pulled his backpack free from his sweater and dumped it out between them.

A fucking mountain of packaged shrimp clattered to the ground alongside containers of seasoning and a single jug of dish soap.

“Just missing actual water. Hard to bring that and everything else,” Danny lied, “But if you get everything together, I’m happy to go grab the jugs I stole.”

The men behind Waylon rushed to grab the crates and get the fuck out before Killer Croc killed any of them.

When Danny returned with huge water cooler jugs of water, Waylon had assembled a makeshift boiler out of a barrel he’d clearly carved into wit his own claws, and a smaller barrel had been thoroughly fucked up and set inside.

It was nice that Danny didn’t have to hide his strength from Waylon. After wrestling him to the ground, it was pointless to play the weak little baby.

He set two of them down and pitched one of the last two across the platform at the behemoth, “You clean the barrels.”

“Why?”

“I brought everything,” Danny countered.

Waylon glared down at the scrawny little bitch bossing him around in his domain. He took the soap with a snarl.

He ignored the shit eating grin on the homeless kid’s face as he cleaned the barrels.

*It wasn’t the first time Danny found himself glared at in such a venomous manner. He recognized the stare from his years being beaten to shit and stuffed in lockers by Dash.*

Danny poured the water into the barrel after Waylon had set it up on the platform. He dumped the spice blends into the water and chucked the empty container at Waylon’s head without a care in the world.

The roar that echoed through the junction was sure to chase Killer Waylon’s minions out of the area if they hadn’t ventured far by now. Waylon either didn’t care or had forgotten. Either was fine by Danny.

A cool breeze swept through the open space as he gave Waylon the finger in response.

*Dash didn’t haunt his mind.*

*Danny had to wonder if he ever did in the first place...*

“You little shit.”

“Hey, pal, you’re the one on my shitlist, not the other way around,” Danny scowled as he listened to the fire crackle under the barrel.

“Bless yer heart if you think I give a fuck about yer shit list,” Waylon dismissed as he tossed some wood from broken crates that had long-since been trashed in a fit of rage Waylon had forgotten about.

*… Actually, the thing he wondered the most was if Dash would have changed if he watched Jack trying to wring his son’s neck in his own bedroom.*

Danny stood next to Waylon as he dumped the seafood into the barrel, “Smells good.”

The fire danced against the blackened barrel. The boiling water sent the seafood tumbling around, and Danny could feel the warmth from it all sink into his bones.

The familiar smells of heat and fragrance that steamed from the broth reminded him of hot summer days where Tucker’s dad had no business cooking anything hot, but had decided to in spite.

The obsession with barbecued shit was definitely a family trait, though boils didn’t fall within that same branch. The Foley Cookouts were a sight to behold.

Danny missed them immensely.

Danny smiled and sighed softly as he watched Waylon lift the makeshift strainer free of the boiling water. The teen waited for the meta to finish before he lunged and clenched his teeth down on Killer Waylon’s still-outstretched tricep.

The yell that Waylon let out brought a slight smile to Danny’s bloodstained lips.

He pulled away and smirked as Waylon whipped around to punch him. The teen caught his hand without flinching.

“What the fuck was that for?!”

“Grundy isn’t my father, moron. You’re causing me shit,” Danny countered, “Did you think I wanted to become Gotham’s latest fucking Rogue?”

“Keep runnin’ yer mouth and I’m going to knock you on yer ass,” Waylon threatened as his teeth glinted in the dim lighting of the fire.

Danny blinked and asked a little too eagerly, “... So I can knock *you* on *your ass* again?”

Waylon stared down at the scrawny brat, and pushed his stupid face back with a palm of his hand, “Eat yer fuckin’ shrimp.”

The concert venue was thick with fog that changed colours with the low underglow of the stage. The chanting had begun long before the musician even made it to the stage, and when she did, the intense lighting made her look otherworldly. They had the lighting down to an artform. The performer’s skin glowed.

Steph had told Cass and Bab’s that she was pretty sure Ember was a meta with flaming hair, and as the punk artist jumped around the stage, Cass and Bab’s found themselves agreeing. It was gorgeous, and shined in the same colour that drowned the venue.

The energy was infectious, and seemed to sweep through the crowd harder and harder with every song. Pyrotechnic masterpieces cast raging, ethereal shadows across a stage that seemed to shimmer despite all its punk glory.

The entire concert was her newest album. It wasn’t online yet.

The marketing, in Bab's opinion, was kind of genius. Throughout Ember's releases, there was a sort-of story that seemed to persist in her songs. Sometimes it was an isolated story, but the fact remained that deciding to tour pre-release with the actual debut of her album at the end of it all drove the sales of her tickets into the stratosphere as her fans clamoured to know the story she was going to tell this time.

And what a story it was.

Cass hadn't been a fan of Ember's before. The music was fun and catchy, but seeing her perform in person, and listening to her express with all-too real emotions that seemed to cascade across the crowd as she told story after heartbreaking story, hooked Cass' heart strings.

Songs of a war no one could see. Tales of being abandoned by everything you'd grown up with, and cast out by those who raised you, only to demand their savior to save them. A sorrowful ballad that felt like Ember's personal apology for unseen crimes, describing the ways barbs could strip someone to the bare essentials of a human being, echoed painfully through the venue. The chanting seemed to warble and shift to the lyrics despite no one knowing a word of it in advance.

Lyrics of total destruction, of being hated, and still moving on, still being kind to those around you moved the crowd to scream with a spiteful rage alongside Ember as she sang.

Watching Ember sing her heart out and reach her own rebel heart out to the crowd pulled at Cass' own more than she knew how to express.

It was the final encore that had Cass crying as she listened, though Steph and Bab's seemed content to scream and cheer.

*Ember, I will remember*

*Ember, nothing remained*

*Ember, someone to fend for*

*I will remember your name*

The song itself wasn't one that had been announced as part of the set list, and given that it was a remix of Ember's most popular song, that felt… strange?

Cass wasn't sure what to expect for concerts, but the defiant twinge in Ember's shoulders made Cass feel like she was hearing something she shouldn't, something so full of devotion, something that was supposed to be hidden…

Something that screamed in her ear more than anything ever could that something tragic happened here.

"Cass? Are you okay?"

*Ember, I will remember*

*Ember, one King remains*

*Embers to cold thereafter*

*I will remember your name*

*Yeah, we will remember his name*

As the final notes belted through the air, Cass watched Ember's eyes widen. The rocker spun around like something was coming for her. The defensive twinge in her shoulders hid the fear too perfectly.

As darkness crashed over the stadium, and the roar of the crowd shook the ground, Cass shook her head slowly.

The split second of disbelieving relief would eat at Cass' mind because it was the same kind of relief she hadn't known how to express when she'd been found.

# Sing to me songs that I can hear in the depths of the flooded street and know that you saw it all

Chapter Notes

Hi lovelies, soooooo I got my wisdoms pulled today (was supposed to post this update before, didn't finish it, finished it post-3 ish hour surgery). it is a mood to be sure. We ball.

In addition to me trying to slow down from cranking things out (and also trying to add some variety to what I write as much as I adore btn), I'll also be down and out recovering from at least one dental surgery. I'm also trying to figure out some other irl things, medical and otherwise, so, again, things will be staying slow for awhile, but I update whenever I update, and that's that, I guess.

Update: Hi, my recovery is not going well, and i need additional surgery (which can apparently only be squeezed in a month from now). Till then, I will be in severe pain even with meds for it :>

Danny wasn’t surprised at the heavy rain that fell from Gotham’s heavens as he climbed up the rungs of a sewer grate and pushed his way through the waterfall of the manhole cover.

The rain itself was warm even as it ricocheted against the cold bricks and pavement of the Gotham Streets. Cars drove by and splashed the sidewalk in spite of the pedestrians that meandered to their destinations. The packed traffic ensured there was no slowing down, no solace, and no grace to the pedestrians who walked as far away from the road as they could.

The blade of water from a passing jeep cut harshly against his side, trapped between the curb and the inlay of bricks on the far side of the walkway.

It was pointless to have moved, and, truthfully, Danny couldn’t remember the last time he was bothered by the grimy water of Gotham. He’d shower again another time.

“Damn, kid, that spray gotcha good, huh?”

Danny turned around just in time for a passing jeep to dip into the puddle. The spray splashed across his chest and stomach.

*The water that dripped down… down… down… It felt like blood pooling down to the interstate below.*

He'd never been more happy that Fenton Works phones were waterproof thanks to his dad's tendency to drop it in the toilet.

A young red-headed man called out from behind him. The man made a face as Danny blinked and wiped the water from his own.

"Fuck, dude, sorry about that," The man winced.

"It's fine," Danny shrugged, "It's only water."

*It's only water.*

"Still, I feel pretty fucking bad that you took another hit cause I stopped you," The ginger shrugged back in response and took pace beside Danny.

Danny just turned and continued walking next to the lithe man, "Well, if it makes you feel better, there's no hard feelings."

"Ha, thanks, kid," The man hummed as he pulled his hood further forwards to hide from the rain.

Danny didn't even bother fixing his hood. His own hair was already plastered against his skin, and the jeep hadn't helped matters.

“Where are you headed in this kind of storm?”

“Around town,” Danny answered vaguely.

“Damn, kid, hope you get there soon. I hate Gotham and it’s shitty weather,” The man grumbled next to Danny as  they came to a stop at the intersection.

“Yeah, you know what, I can get behind that,” Danny smirked, “Fuck Gotham’s weather.”

“Fuck Gotham’s weather,” The man agreed with a playful smirk, “What’s you’re name? ‘Kid’ is getting old fast.”

Danny watched the light on the other side change, and the walk tone began to scream in his ears. He crossed the road with the man on his heels, but it didn’t bother him at all, “Tommy.”

“Roy,” The archer answered back as he looked knowingly at the black sweater and lump that defined the backpack beneath the hoodie, “Nice to meet ya.”

“You too,” The teen said without looking back.

The thing about seeing Waylon was knowing that any action Danny could take against the man for semi-sort of outing him to Gotham’s underworld would be unproductive.

Danny could choose to ignore it all he liked, but he knew deep down that if it brought Grundy trouble, he wouldn't be able to ignore it.

*He'd never been able to ignore it before.*

If it already made it to the pool tables where gang members seemed to converge, then it was a matter of time.

It didn't matter that Danny wasn't okay with that knowledge.

*But, then again, when has it ever mattered?*

A rumour, once unleashed, would run amuck. The only thing to be done was to ignore it or embrace it, and denial didn't work with Clockwork. Things only got less overwhelming when he spent the days trying to figure out what being king meant to him— for him— and doing his best to accept that amidst moving from alley to alley.

*As Danny watched pigeons and people alike, with both passing him by, it wasn't hard to realize that most people would rather Danny be dead than alive so they wouldn't have to ignore him. It made it almost too easy to find his place among others long cast aside and ignored for convenience.*

*For better or worse, he was the Ghost King, and he actually felt pretty good about it.*

As much as he wanted to be mad, to stay mad, forgiving Waylon was easy.

Roy was a nice enough guy, in Danny's opinion.

He wasn't too intrusive as he chatted it up with Danny and walked half-through Gotham with him in a weird sort of comradery.

Even under Roy's raincoat, Danny was sure the tall redhead was cold and wet by the time they parted ways, and still, Roy just palmed Danny's head like an idiot and vanished down a different crosswalk than Danny did, choosing to head straight to wherever his destination was rather than stick alongside Danny.

And that was fine by him.

Danny stepped through the flooded crosswalk and disappeared from Downtown.

The traffic in the area was more packed than usual. Danny wasn't surprised.

He kinda figured that crowds would pack in to see her considering just how many people packed Amity to do so.

Danny smirked as he walked down the sidewalk and stopped in front of Gotham Stadium. He hadn't paid attention to just where Ember would be performing, but there was only one place large enough to hold the crowds Ember tended to draw in.

The halfa peered across the street.

Through the cars and the haze of the rain, Danny caught the eyes of the security guards across the street who stood in front of the doors, safe from the rain.

He took a deep breath in and released a cloud of heavy fog.

As the water splashed over the sidewalk in dense mists, Danny vanished from sight and drifted across the street. He watched the human-passing security guards shift uneasily as he came closer and closer.

When he passed them all together, Danny could see them shiver from the corner of his eyes.

He ducked behind one of the pillars in the entryway and turned back to the security guards with a shit eating grin.

“Hey guys,” Danny chuckled as the wind ripped through the entrance, “Long time no see. How's the tour?”

“Gho-” One of them began, but cut themselves off.

Danny made careful eye contact with each of the guards that looked in his direction.

*Ghost Child.*

“Nice to see you too,” the teenager grinned, “But maybe don’t say that stuff in public?”

He scratched his chin awkwardly as he stared at the ghosts in front of him.

Other than the cars and the rain, it was quiet.

If Danny didn’t already know it, he’d say something had changed.

“I know I don’t have a ticket or anything,” Danny started as he shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged, “But do you think she’d have a minute for Babypop?”

The bigger of the ghosts stepped forwards and took him by the elbow, “This way, sir.”

Danny couldn’t keep the cheeky grin from his face as the ghost pushed the doors open and nodded to the very human security guards who had no idea why a soaking wet kid was being guided through by security.

One of the cockier members of the venue’s security team stopped them, “VIP?”

“Yeah,” Danny smirked at the ghost, *“VIP.”*

Danny’s escort frowned down at him with a neutral but stern expression. Danny felt like laughing.

“No,” The ghost corrected, “Personal guest, *actually.”*

The expression on the security guard’s face twisted, “Alright, but he needs the proper passes to get in just like everyone else.”

Danny wanted to snark back, but the tension in the security guard’s shoulders was the same tension he’d gotten used to seeing in the shoulders of every person who’d ever kicked him out of a location for looking a little too much like the homeless kid that he was.

*Please don’t make me the asshole for kicking out a homeless kid.*

The flood of anger was hard to fight off even as he grit his teeth. From the corner of his eye, he could see the venue’s security at the inner entrances mumble into their radios as the nearest venue’s security stood.

Danny pursed his lips and nodded in acknowledgement.

“Eh, it’s fine, I’ll just see her another time,” Danny said as he shrugged out of the ghost’s grip.

Danny backed up with his hands in the air as he tried to keep his distance from the guards.

“I’ve got his information right here," The ghost said as he pulled a pass from his pocket. Danny couldn't see whether or not it was really  a pass in that moment, but it must have been judging from the expression on their faces.

“Listen, kid,” one of the security guards said as she advanced forwards from the desk, “We’ll need to see some ID anyways. This is a… *strange* case, and the doors to the venue are closed. Concert’s already started.”

“I’m not here to see the concert,” Danny said, “Though if I get to, it’ll be a nice bonus. I’m here to see a friend,” Danny said as he tried to appease security.

He ignored the uneasy look on his ghost escort's face as he fished around his pocket for his wallet. He very visibly pulled his ID from the fold within, and passed it over.

*Tom Kingdan*

“Sorry about the hair,” Danny cracked a smile and gestured to the picture on the card, “It was raining cats and dogs outside, and an umbrella didn’t save me, so I kinda gave up.”

Danny gave a subtle nod to the ghost to hand the VIP passes to him. He let his fingers glide across them as he passed them forwards to the security and hoped they wouldn’t notice how cold the carefully iced card felt.

*Tom Kingdan, VIP Pass, Backstage Access*

“Look, you understand just how fishy this is?” The guard frowned as she flipped the card back and forth.

“Yeah,” Danny nodded as one of the venue guards took him by the arm., “Can you at least scan it? I was told to just show up and grab the pass  off of Ember’s Personal security? They know me.”

“He’s a menace, but we’re very used to having *Tom* backstage,” The ghost grumbled.

It was funny to Danny.

The ghosts that were so used to taking over space without being questioned were not liking that Gotham’s venues questioned them back. The ghosts had no idea how many concerts had likely been ruined by a lapse in security, and were taking no risks with a superstar.

The man frowned as he adjusted his glasses on his face. He looked down his nose, but reluctantly began to type in the information into the terminal manually.

Danny put his hands on the desk in front of the terminal. He moved the hand that was out of sight of the human guards through the desk and into the computer. Modding Doom with Tucker and fucking with City Hall’s records to piss off Vlad had made general fucking with computers too easy.

The silence was awkward, and Danny was almost certain the man behind the terminal ran the info through multiple times, trying desperately to find a hint of fraud. They spent over half an hour trying to find a reason to refuse Danny admission.

However, as far as the system was concerned, Tom Kingdan had, in fact, been awarded a personal pass from Ember McLain.

Danny grinned as the man slid the pass back over, and he looked down at the iridescent light blue lettering across the dark blue VIP Pass.

He threw the lanyard over his head and turned back to his escort, “Well, now that that’s resolved, can you take me to Ember? I mean, I don’t mind leaving to keep the peace, but something tells me that if Ember ever found out that I was forced to get the fuck out, she’d cause quite the scene.”

“Oh, *that* I don’t doubt,” The ghost hummed as they looked down at the venue’s security, “There’s only so many *disappointments* Miss McLain will stand for. It seems she’s been very generous so far, but making her own guest feel unsafe? I’m sure we will discuss this at a later time. Mr. Kingdan, if you would kindly come with me.”

“Sure, I’d be more than happy to,” Danny said as he slid his identification back into his wallet and shoved it back.

He made a bit of a show over delicately grabbing his escort’s elbow as if he was a kid that would get lost in a stadium too big and too scary to traverse alone, and waved as he was led down a hallway, away from the humans.

It did, actually, feel nice to see the fuckers he used to beat up every couple of weeks come to his defense, and he was absolutely basking in the glow of  his own success.

“Sorry about that, dude,” Danny whispered, “Most places don’t seem to really like it when you show up looking like you’re homeless, which, to be fair, I am.”

The ghost said nothing as they disappeared down the hallways. The dimly lit backstage hallways tucked far away from the public’s access had a comfortable warmth.

The sounds of Ember’s guitar rang more clearly than the other instruments her band played, but the undertones of the keyboard ricocheted under the sharp plucks and strums of Ember’s own.

The space he walked into was large and fluttering with Ember’s stage crew. It felt like he crossed some invisible threshold as the crew’s heads swung towards him and stared.

“I can bring you directly to her,” The ghost offered quietly from over his shoulder, “I can tell her that you’re here.”

Danny smiled softly.

He took a deep breath in and exhaled with a deep sense of relief. The halfa shook his head as he stared ahead to passageways that he knew lead to the stage.

“Nah, let her perform,” Danny refused in a warm tone.

The muffled sounds of Ember’s song echoed around the space, getting louder and louder as Danny left the ghost’s side in favour of walking down the shadowed hallway.

“Why not?” came the passive accusation. Even after everything that happened, Danny could hear it. *Why aren't you set on stopping this?*

He looked back and shrugged, “If she’s not overdoing it, I’m not going to stop her.”

“You always have in the past.”

“You know as well as I do that things are different now,” Danny shut down quietly, “So don’t bother telling me what changed, buddy. Believe me: I’m all too aware.”

The edges of the ghost’s human appearance seemed to blur at the reminder from the lost child in front of him.

As the Ghost Child walked down the hall to watch Ember from backstage, all Ember’s crew could think about as they watched him go what the frantic horror carved into the halfa’s face

as he told them to get out of Amity and never return from amidst a sea of ectoplasm-soaked earth.

Danny didn't mind the breeze that blew down the hallway. It was nice, and even though the breeze itself was warm, the moment it blew through his clothes, the warm wind against his face turned into a bone deep chill.

He didn't mind.

The ending chords that Danny was all too familiar with became clearer and clearer as he marched closer to the bounds of the stage. The roar of the crowd was as refreshing as ever, and just as infectious in their manic enjoyment. She was having just as much fun as the audience.

The flames of her teal hair had been mostly tamed into something that would be brushed off as either complex special effects or being a meta with how she'd used the water that coated the stage alongside the intricate pyrotechnics.

In a weird way, Danny missed her performances.

Danny found himself at the threshold of the stage as the lights flashed still with a sense of finality from Ember's music that Danny wasn't used to seeing in concerts. He usually stopped her long before.

Ember, for all the trouble she caused Danny, looked better than he had ever seen her as she finished the final notes of her concert.

He couldn't help the cheeky grin that crossed his face as Ember spun around in a spray of water. The droplets caught the last rays of the concert's lights as her wide eyes searched the

shadow with a fear Danny hadn't seen from Ember since Pariah escaped his confinement.

Danny ran a thumb over the finger, and even though his thumb brushed over nothing but skin, the teen was painfully aware of the gothic ring that was just out of sight.

It wasn't hard to figure out that becoming King had changed his ecto-signature considering that Ember's posse didn't recognize him until Danny was standing right in front of him. Ember's blind panic was just a double-blind confirmation for him.

Still, as the lights fell and the stadium drowned in the sea of black, the thing that the lights didn't get a chance to hide from Danny was the heavy relief that spread across her face like wildfire.

He heard the footsteps splashing across the stage even without seeing the rockstar running for him.

Danny lifted his arms just in time to get almost barreled over as Ember pulled him into a tight hug at high speeds. As Ember's arms wrapped around him to keep him close, Danny found himself returning the hug with a soft chuckle.

He propped his chin up on her shoulder as she squeezed him close, "Miss me?"

Ember let out a wet laugh and whispered weakly, "Like you wouldn't believe, Babypop."

# If I wear my love on my sleeve, will you realize that I am cold, or will you recognize that I like the embrace of it

Chapter Notes

Hey besties, so, some news health-wise:

I have arguably the weirdest monstrosity still left in my jaw (had to go for more xrays), and I have another oral surgery coming up in a few weeks to remove the last of my one wisdom tooth (though it is actually more accurate to say the last half of a tooth plus a hidden extra bonus wisdom tooth that seems to be either entangled or fused with the bigger tooth). Horrifying, truly.

Anyways, between the pain, and the increased exhaustion during recovery, and also my pre-existing chronic fatigue and pain, I haven't been doing much in terms of consistently writing. In addition to a second surgery/recovery, I also have allergy testing because I'm tired of trying to eat and discovering allergies by trying to consume a meal. its hard enough as it is with my broken-ass mouth --- And also here's to hoping the nerve pain isn't fucking permanent damage because I will spend weeks crying about it :>

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was with great reluctance that Roy had dragged himself from his boyfriend's bed and poured over the documents that Damian had originally handed over.

In Roy's own Drama Queen ™ experience, the briefcase and the assassin's get up was a little much, and Roy felt uniquely qualified to say that considering his ex had pulled the same shit all the time.

It was passe, unoriginal, and plain-old boring.

It was also effective, but Roy knew that Damian could have otherwise bought a tablet and just never connected it to any wifi and hid it somewhere good. It would have been just as effective as the mountain of papers with copious notes that were written in Damian's neat writing, though some of the things that Damian wrote felt like they were straight out of some hallucination from Roy's past heroin fever dreams.

Roy understood the risks of having literally any technology around someone even more nosy than Oli. So.

Damian got a pass for his dramatics this time.

Roy skimmed everything over, chuckling at the added notes from Jay in plain blue pen. The beginnings of their plans were laid out before them in point form, but the thing that stood out the most was the single question Jason noted down with an asterisk that he'd seen littered throughout the notes. The question itself was hidden near the bottom of the stack of papers despite the asterisks being everywhere else.

***Snacks****

Roy squinted and flipped back through the stacks again.

There was an asterisk next to every "bad trip vibes"-type statement from Damian that Roy had already read over.

When Jason got home, he expected Roy to be hiding in bed with one of his newly purchased gaming laptops to replace the one that Jason had funded that inexplicably fried in the weird ass EMP power outage.

He could also have been sleeping, but years and years of patrolling the night tended to mean that sleeping happened from five or six am until noon or later whenever Roy could manage it, which was often assuming the archer didn't decide to pull an all-nighter and just stay up.

Apparently, it was an all-nighter kind of night night because Jason walked in on Roy pining things to his caseboards over top of his pre-existing cases. There were no red strings or

strings of any kind, as a matter of fact. Roy seemed to be sorting things via stickers.

Where his boyfriend got stickers was a fucking mystery.

"... Whatcha doing?" Jason asked slowly.

"Better question," Roy began as he turned with a neutral expression. He pointed to one of the dozens of pages pinned up, "Was Damian at any point high on fucking edibles?"

Jason's face twisted in confusion as he looked at the page Roy was tapping. His own handwriting sat neatly next to Damian's own.

*"There's nothing wrong with being a prostitute, but these comments are disgusting. Even if you get around a lot, it doesn't make you a whore or a slut. The prostitutes are some of the coolest people. They're missing out."* ***— Snacks****

"Oh," He blinked. Jason shook his head with a chuckle, "Nah, Snacks is a street kid. The Alley Kids like him, and Matilda's girls do too."

"Wait, this is the dumpster kid, right?" Roy asked as he scanned the stickers in his hand.

Jason nodded as he peeled off his body armor and chucked it onto the couch without a single fuck to give about putting them away properly, "Yeah, he's a pretty good kid. Almost killed him twice and he's still not scared of me."

"Kid's got balls," Roy smirked.

Jason nodded, "He's 'Snacks' for giving shit to the Kids, and 'Dumpster' for appearing out from behind them and scaring the shit out of the girls."

“Well,” Roy admitted as he peeled a little pizza sticker from the sheet and stuck it next to where Jason had written ‘Snacks’ with a shrug, “At least I don’t have to hunt down your brother and give him the drug talk.”

“I wouldn’t worry. He…” Jason trailed off as he stared at Roy and the sticker sheet, “... Wait. What were you going to put if I had said yes?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know, nerd,” Roy teased elusively. He peeled off a lemon and put it on one of the sheets with a screenshot from one of Damian’s classmates, the son of Gotham’s power plant owner.

Jason pouted as he peered over his board, “Well you’re the one sticking fucking food stickers all over the shit Damian gave me.”

“You’re smart,” Roy said amicably, “You and your pixie shorts can figure it out.”

“Fuck you,” Jason snorted as he pecked the redhead’s cheek, “So, think the plan’s good enough?”

“Well, personally? I think that Damian’s restraining himself, but I am down for extortion, blackmail, and hacking these fuckers,” Roy smirked as he dramatically laid his hand against his chest as if he were an elegant damsel, “And, of course, I am more than happy to take that on. I’m not just eye candy for you, Kori, and Artemis.”

“Right, right, you’re a cavity,” Jason agreed teasingly.

“Watch it, Jay,” Roy smirked as he put a smiling california roll next to the lemon, “If I tell Biz you’ve got a cavity, he’ll march you into the nearest dentist office.”

“You better fucking not.”

“Try me.”

Jason didn’t figure out the weird arbitrary food sticker sorting system Roy had created on no sleep and stickers from god knew where, but they did figure out who was going to do what.

As Roy gathered a few drives and stuffed them into the pockets of his Arsenal gear before layering civilian clothes on top, Jason didn’t bother hiding his own gear behind civvies as he left through the same window as always.

“I want Chinese,” Jason called back as he jumped out and shut the window behind him. Roy watched Jason disappear into the night with a scowl.

“As if I’m going to be able to bring Chinese home at 4am when I’m done hacking corporations?” Roy scoffed as he walked out of the apartment into the low light of Gotham’s rainfall.

Roy, like so many times before, knew he’d find Jason whipping up some homemade meal when he got home.

Roy felt like a massive asshole when Snacks turned to look at him and got absolutely wrecked from the wave.

Then another.

Snacks, however, didn't seem pissed at him at all which was more than Roy would say for a majority of people, himself included. Actually, the kid seemed as good natured as Jason had said.

By the end of their stroll, Roy had decided that he liked Tommy.

By the end of the evening, Roy was kicking it back in the CEO of a major fashion company's cushy office.

"Baaaaaaabe," The comm in Roy's ear cut through the silence.

"Pixie Shorts," Roy shot back as his eyes flickered across the company's financial records and, with the care of an elephant, dumped them onto the internet so they would be the first of the headlines in all of Gotham's news outlets tomorrow morning.

It would be the first of the stories, but not the last.

Roy pocketed one of his several drives in a pocket filled with the other conquests of the night and slipped out of the office building without triggering a single alarm.

There were upsides to the Bats not knowing the archer was in town.

"Let's be honest here," Jason smirked on the other end of the comms as he picked the lock to a house of a Monster in one of Gotham's higher income areas after a final glance at the notes written in his phone, "If I wore the shorts now, you'd jump me so fucking fast."

“Your ass would, admittedly, look delicious, but the poor chafing. Ouch,” His little shit of a boyfriend mockingly winced on the other side.

He stalked through the fancy little piece of shit of a house. With every door Jason passed, he carefully and silently peaked into. When he inevitably found it to be empty, He carefully snooped and collected everything that seemed interesting to him, and a few documents that looked like some truly boring-ass shit.

That was fine. Helpful, even, but it wasn’t what he was looking forward to.

When Jason finally cracked open the door to the room of a teenage boy, Jason’s smirk grew under his helmet.

He silently cracked the kid’s phone, cloned all of the kid’s devices, and quietly backed out into the hallway. He shut the door, took a breath, and kicked that bastard in the loudest way he could manage.

He watched in sweet, sweet satisfaction as the teenage dudebro threw himself up in bed and against the wall screaming.

“What’s up, fucker?!” Jason started as he walked into the room and cracked his knuckles lightly, “Listen up: I’m fucking sick of your dad’s shit…”

“I’m just his kid!” The shirtless teen screamed as he covered his head. Like that would stop a bullet, but go for it kid.

“Are you sure?” Jason asked slowly, “Because when I looked into his dealing, guess who I found dealing to other kiddies in the playground?”

And everyone knew one of Hood’s rules was no dealing to kids.

“I’ll stop! I-I’ll stop, just don’t kill me!”

With a very literal gun to his head, Jason believed that the kid would shape up, but it was the lingering threat of what exactly Red Hood would do to the family legacy and the status that came with it that had the ex-Bat believing the kid would start changing.

If he didn’t, his shit would be aired out to the school on top of the screenshots Roy had artfully posted from his best friend's social media, in addition to the possibility that the kid was about to wind up in Juvie.

God, he loved his boyfriend.

When Roy made his way back to Jason’s apartment after visiting no less than eight separately owned corporations, a handful of different offices owned by the same company, two law firms, and a 24-hour convenience store for an energy drink. He was greeted by the warm smells of the Chinese Jay had demanded he buy at the beginning of the night.

Roy snorted as he kicked his shoes off and locked the door behind him.

Typical Jason.

“So how was cracking heads and cracking egos?” The red head smirked as he walked into the apartment and leaned against the fridge.

“Kinda fun, not going to lie. The fact that the brat handed me a drug ring that was dealing to kids on a silver platter without knowing it didn’t hurt either.”

“Interesting,” Roy intoned darkly.

Jason returned the look on his boyfriend’s face, “Listen, I can do Junior a favour and also get shit done for myself. That being said, between the nightmares of Red Hood coming from him and the social backlash for having his shitty takes outed online, I imagine Damian will finally have some peace and fucking quiet.”

Roy nodded as he stripped his civies from his Arsenal get up and began stripping himself free from his vigilante gear, “And if it doesn’t?”

“Then your leaks and professional corporate sabotage will take care of the rest,” Jason said with the utmost confidence before he paused in consideration, “And I could always beat the shit out of a teenage racist.”

“You’re telling me you didn’t?”

“Nah,” Jason shrugged, “Didn’t wanna be too on the nose right away and have it point back to the kid, you know?”

Jason said nothing past that, and that was fine by Roy. They sat in the peaceful silence of the kitchen while Jay finished frying some rice and Roy pestered Kori in the middle of whatever Tamaranian meeting she was in without a care in the world. The fact that she was more than happy to send back out of context quotes with the expectation of Roy to either go “What the actual fuck do you mean that was suggested” or otherwise laugh at the stupidity was only slightly irrelevant.

Roy knew damn well the Crown Princess of Tamaran was doing her best to look focused yet bothered by the interruption. He messaged back a photoshopped picture of the Tamaranian High Council with *“When Blorthog hits, but you still can’t make a fucking single decision as a team"* in stupid wavy text and ate Chinese food from Jason’s plate.

Across the city, Duke was just waking up and eating a bowl of overnight oats with Buddy, who was sitting dutifully on Duke's coffee table as the meta watched Gotham's most popular morning talk show. When all they could talk about was the fast past scandals that were breaking across Gotham's mega corporations, Duke figured Damian had managed to get his revenge enacted after all. It was kind of amazing watching Damian's work all play out. He made a note to try to avoid pissing the kid off in the future.

As he swapped to the news and saw the arrest of a drug ring with possible mob connections and the newly announced investigation following the collapse of the ring, Duke figured it just as well confirmed who Damian went to see.

"What do you think, Bud?" Duke said around the mouthful of oatmeal, "How likely on a scale of zero to 'it's Jason' do you think that it's Jason? Because I think we're pretty high up there."

The glowing snowman said nothing as it smiled brightly at the massive flatscreen mounted to Duke's wall that was specially made by Tim for Duke's shitty eyesight.

Duke nodded sagely, "Damn, Buddy. You're so right."

Duke would have to congratulate Jason on a job well done the next time he saw him.

Chapter End Notes

don't mind the shift in publishing dates. ao3 decided to backdate the chaper for me and i don't remember exactly the day i uploaded it, but i know it was this weekend. sorry about that

# we can be the hometown runaways the world wants to see when we try hard enough to be ourselves

Chapter Notes

> I'm alive. Tired, but alive. My mouth has officially stopped hurting :> I am dealing with a chronic fatigue flare, but we ball besties. I'm still trying to play catch up chapter-wise, sorry

In the chaos of the concert's wake, Danny had no problem leaving Ember's crew to clean up in favour of walkin through the halls to her dressing room.

It was funny, really.

With the amount of things strewn about in the hall, he could almost imagine that the cluttered atmosphere of the halls didn't haunt him like the tattered remains of his parents' lab after he tried to escape through the portal and failed.

*"Johnny! Please, I don't want to know if he stays a Ghost—"*

*"We won't," The gruff punk said with a strange, dark distance even as the older teen avoided Danny's own frantic eyes as the halfa shot the portal's shut down button a moment too early.*

*Ember and her crew had the tungsten doors slam shut half a second before they could cross the boundary.*

*And Danny was out of time.*

*“I’m going to tear you apart!” His dad roared as he aimed a broken monstrosity of an experimental cannon at him amidst the sea of broken vials of chemicals that vaguely seared his skin, “Molecule by molecule!”*

*“Ember, get out of here,” Danny hissed as he prepared to make it out of the lab however he had to.*

When the concert was over, Cass wasted no time in anxiously pushing for Steph to be a little more excited about their backstage meet and greet even as Babs reached out to still Cass’ anxious fluttering.

The redhead looked over her glasses with a frown, “Cass? Hey, what happened.”

Cass frowned as she looked back, trying to see the stage through the darkness of the venue’s slight teal fog, “Something is wrong. She was scared. Someone was there, and she was scared and happy.”

“If she was happy, are you sure something is wrong?” Stephanie frowned as she looked over Cass’s shoulder into the darkness of the stage.

“No. Even with the happiness, something is wrong,” Cass insisted.

Barbara let go of Cass’s hand in favour of moving herself away from the crowd with a calculating gaze, “I’ve got a pretty good idea of how to get back there faster.”

In true ex-Bat Girl-turned-Bat-Hacker fashion, Babs had already downloaded the schematics for the building in case of “emergencies” and was not afraid to sweet talk the venue staff into

letting her make her way through a different part of the building that would be easier to traverse.

If she talked them into feeling helpful by giving them directions to Ember's green room for the meet and greet they would already be going for... well.

It was no one's business if they got there before anyone else did to see what exactly was going on.

"Sometimes, you're my favourite Bat, Babs," Stephanie smirked as they bolted through the halls.

"Only sometimes? See if I hack for you again any time soon," Barbara sassed back as she gestured for them to turn up ahead, "And see if I scrub you from the cameras instead of just me and Cass."

"Don't be too hasty, I gotta save room for Cass in the number one slot too," Stephanie smirked, "No dorks are allowed in my Number One Bat Family Member slot."

"Explains why you and Tim didn't work out."

"Alas, he is the family's biggest dork," Steph mourned teasingly.

"Where have you been?" Ember asked to break the silence even as the cold air echoed around the ventilation system.

The warm lights that cast down from the lights did nothing but add to the glow surrounding Ember as her hair, free of the constant watery bombardment of the stage, flickered slowly back to life.

“Funny story, really,” Danny shrugged, “I ran.”

“That’s not funny, Baby Pop,” Ember scowled as she spun her guitar to rest against her back, “What the fuck happened back in Amity? Because all I know is I showed up in the middle of an active shit show.

“I’m serious, Ember. I ran,” Danny sighed and scratched his head. “It… Vlad… I don’t know. I should have expected Vlad to expose me eventually. He held a news conference, made sure not to use any words that would trigger Tucker’s media monitoring systems. If it wasn’t a live broadcast, we would have caught it in time.”

The silence was thick enough to swallow, untouched by the fever pitch of an audience that was no doubt still screaming Ember’s name even as the venue’s security tried and failed to get them to exit the premises as normal. Danny knew exactly what that was like after one too many Ember concerts.

The teenage ghosts stared each other down with unreadable expressions, though at opposite ends of the spectrum. One expression was carefully neutral, perfected under intense pressure. The other rapidly flickered from emotion to emotion, too fast and too different to fully discern.

Danny, who’d long grown used to the constant silence, found himself watching Ember’s own uncomfort at the lack of sound grow. He found himself reaching out through her unrest and extending an olive branch not unlike he had almost a year ago, “Normally, we do.”

*Not this time.*

It went unsaid. He knew Ember heard it anyway.

*“Dipstick—”*

*“Run!” Danny yelled as his parents sprung forwards ready to uphold their long-time promise that Danny was stupid enough to think wouldn’t come to pass.*

*As his dad pulled the trigger, Danny found himself power-tackling his father to the ground in a mockery of what Dash had done to him multiple times a day since they were in kindergarten.*

*In the moment between his dad’s back bouncing from the floor and Danny’s own impact to the cold tile, he twisted around and fired his own shot in tandem with the cannon. He stayed long enough for the portal to become a tangled, shredded mess before he found himself sprinting fout of the lab. He scrambled back up to his room in the hopes that he could grab his thermos.*

*He had no idea where Ember had gone.*

*He just hoped it would be enough.*

*Maybe for once, he could be enough.*

*As he stuffed a couple pairs of clothes in his backpack along with the familiar canister, he found himself hoping against all odds that she, at the very least, would have enough time.*

*“Danny… I didn’t think they’d—”*

*“Don’t. We don’t have time for this.”*

*Jazz’s frazzled expression stiffened. She jerked her arms forwards and stuffed Danny’s beat up first aid kid into the back along with some metal stick.*

*“I love you,” She promised through the dark determination etching itself across her features.*

Ember clenched her teeth and bit back whatever she was going to say. Danny didn’t bother rushing her.

“I saw the re-run later the next day on the news,” Ember said eventually as her hands twitched, itching to grab the guitar on her back.

Danny nodded, “Yeah, so I think you can tell things didn’t exactly go well.”

*“Go well?!* Danny, I arrived to a *bloodbath,”* Ember clenched her hands and jabbed him the chest, “The lab was a fucking mess. I’ve *never* seen your parents like that. Johnny and Kitty just barely made it back through the portal before you broke it. God knows I didn’t fucking make it.”

The bitterness in Ember’s voice wasn’t directed towards him in any way, but Danny still felt the awful responsibility of it.

“Sorry about that. Mom and dad… They… I was trying to shut down the portal before your gang and the power couple came barging in,” Danny urged in the quiet of the hall. He watched as Ember returned back and continued to lead him back to her green room, “I didn’t mean to leave you to fend for yourself. You just had to get out of there.”

“I figured that out when I saw the blood smear on the interstate,” Ember said with a burning anger despite the growing shine to her eyes, “Yeah, maybe we came looking to cause shit, but everything had been a little too, I don’t know, unsettling. Nothing felt right. Just our luck that we walked into the middle of it all going to shit.”

The confession made the teen’s stomach drop. She was right, of course. He hadn’t wanted to acknowledge it back then, but things had been weird for a long time.

“Kitty thought… *we all* thought that maybe halfas don’t stay ghosts after living as one for a lifetime,” Ember seemed swallowed around her words, “I didn’t think I’d be actually faced with that so soon until I saw your blood on the pavement. Existentistential dread ain’t my scene.”

“That, gotta be honest here, is something I never considered, but I don’t think you need to worry now,” Danny said as his thumb rubbed at the bare skin of his fingers for a ring he knew was there but wasn’t there at the same time.

“When I watched Johnny grab Kitty and run, you screamed at me to get the hell out of town with my crew. You looked at me in a way I never thought I would see from you,” Ember whispered softly as she rounded the corner and paused in front of the door, “I’ve seen you cocky. Angry. Upset. Hell, I’ve seen you scared.”

Danny couldn't help but watch the painful way Ember’s hands clenched the door handle. The punk’s shoulders held themselves a little too tightly, a little too close to her ears.

“I never want to see the horrified betrayal that was on your dumb fucking face from that day ever again, Dipstick, but I’m not lucky like that. I see it when I sleep, and I see the blood from the interstate,” The rockstar hissed as she avoided eye contact with Danny.

It wasn’t hard to tell that she wasn’t sure if she ever wanted to look him in the eye again.

That was fair, Danny figured, and he wouldn’t be the one to make her do so.

Danny let the heavy silence sit for a minute, but Ember didn't continue. He spoke in his best attempt at an even, measured tone, "After you ran, I bought you as much time as I could. Jazz met me at my room, gave me my restocked first aid kit and a weapon, and locked herself in the Ops Center. And, yes, maybe I shouldn't have gone back afterwards, but I wasn't letting mom and dad keep the thermos."

He didn't need to defend it. The turning nausea on Ember's face at the thought of a working thermos being in the changed parents' hands was agreement enough.

"When I got outside, the Guys in White were already starting to swarm, tanks and all. It's nothing I haven't fought before."

"But it was different," Ember added, but it wasn't a question.

Danny shrugged but ultimately nodded, "Tucker and Sam met me in the forest on the edge of Amity. Turns out, they'd been preparing too," Danny fumbled his wallet out and passed his ID to Ember.

Ember's hand released the creaking door knob, and snatched the cards from his hands. For the first time in a longtime, Ember's familiar smirk crossed her face as she let out a cackling laugh.

"Tom Kingdan?!" Ember demanded as she waved the ID around with a refreshing mirth, "Baby Pop, you're so fucking dead if Pariah Dark ever wakes up again. With a name proclaiming yourself King, dude, if he didn't hate your guys before, Pariah will hate them now."

"Yeah, well, he will hate me for a lot more than my name," Danny smirked as he snatched the cards back. He slid them back into his wallet and phased them back into the safety of the purse binned between his back and his bag.

She turned back and pushed the door to her green room open.

“Yeah, like forcing him and his jammies back to bed for eternity."

"Well," Danny considered as he glanced at his bare hnds, "Maybe a little more than that, you know?"

"I mean? I guess so?" Ember asked with a slow breath, though the smile didn’t fade much from her face. It reminded Danny of the peaceful acceptance he’d grown to see on his own face Her face shifted into a careful curiousity, “Hey, do you think we could go home at all? Don’t tell me we’re stranded here, Baby Pop. I love touring, and I would tour forever, but I have a life outside of all of this. If Clockwork came to bug ya once, do you think he’d do it again?””

“I broke the portal. It can’t open on our side anymore,” Danny scrunched his nose, “But that doesn’t mean we’re stranded, and we don't need Clockwork.”

Ember stared flatly at him before she pitched a guitar pick at his head, “Are you stupid? What? Like Wulf is going to know where the hell we are and when we need help?”

“I mean, seeing Wulf would be nice, but no,” Danny shook his head. He stuffed his hands into his jeans with a shrug, “I don’t need Wulf to make a portal. I can make them myself now. Am I good at it? Hell no, but I’m not anxious to start practicing either.”

“Are you fucking serious?” Ember asked as she snatched a soda from the mini fridge.

“Yeah. Actually, I’m the Ghost King,” Danny nodded as he sat down on a couch for the first time in almost a year, “So, as it turns out, the Ring of Rage can make portals. I just had to get shot, dig bullets from my stomach in a burning alley, and have Fright Knight scare the shit out of me to go and get it because apparently that's what you do when you find out you’re the Ghost King.”

Ember paused in the middle of cracking open her drink, “Scuse me? The fuck?!”

“Yeah!” Danny agreed enthusiastically, “My thoughts exactly! As if almost dying in a burning alleyway wasn’t enough for Clockwork, right?”

“Pariah Dark really is going to kill you,” Ember deadpanned as she held onto her still-unopened drink.

“I guess we’d find out if I would die a human or live as a ghost at that point,” Danny shot back. It was nice to talk with someone he didn’t need to hide from.

In the silence of the green room, Danny saw Ember toil with her own thoughts for a minute. She cracked her drink open and looked over at him, “Can I ask you somethin’, Baby Pop?”

“You? Never.”

“Do you miss them?”

Danny took a slow breath. The rare calls he could get with Tucker, Sam, and Jazz were nice, but they missed each other terribly. For the most part, it got easier.

Sometimes it was harder. Sometimes it felt like he would be swallowed whole by the feelings.

“Yeah, of course I do,” Danny exhaled slowly, “It’s weird without Tucker and Sam, and don’t even get me started on not having Jazz around.”

Ember scowled and threw one of her guitar picks at the scruffy teen on her couch. She watched as it bounced against his chest and landed on his lap, “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

The silence was deafening, and as it dragged on, Ember thought she may have crossed a line. He just stared at the pick in his lap.

If she wasn’t looking at him, she would have missed the devastation that crossed his face as he whispered back, “Ember, I miss them so fucking much, and not a day goes by where I want them to miss me as much as I miss them.”

# the nightmares I leave behind were the truest dreams of your better tomorrow, so I hope I take the bad with me when I go

Chapter Notes

> hey lovelies, sorry. was drowning in irl shit for quite some time (still am but oh well). also the jaw pain is permenant :> so we will add that to the chronic pain roster. anyways, i will be doing my best to get more chapters written soon, but i figured fuck it, we ball. feral post

It was funny.

Ember usually had so much to say, but she could bring herself to form a single note in the aftermath of Danny's confession.

She only found herself staring at the kid that haunted her for years. It was strange what you found yourself missing when it wasn't around, and his cheeky, smug-ass, party-crashing attitude left a hole she hadn't been expecting.

But, then again, she thought he was gone. *Gone* gone. Gone for good.

Ember spent a lot of time staring out into the horizon of the tour bus' windows wondering exactly what was beyond the Infinite Realms. The idea that maybe Danny would never get more than his bloodied end against the pavement haunted her even more than the cutting edge of his absence.

*If anyone deserves a happy end, it's the ones who never get them…*

"I spent a long time pouring over that day. The shit that led to it," Danny said amidst the silence.

“I won’t lie, dude,” Ember whispered, “I do too. I don’t think anything has bugged me as much as that day.”

“I spent months being angry, and I’m still angry. I spent so long coming to terms with what happened to me, with what happened to all of us. The panic attacks. The flashbacks.”

In that singular moment, eye contact with Danny was the coldest Ember had ever felt, but it was the same cold that reminded her of a brisk wind that sank to your bones no matter how many layers you were hiding under.

It was weird, but she felt seen.

“I want them to miss me. I want them to miss me as much as I miss them, but if I do, then I have to accept that they *never will* . They miss someone who doesn’t exist. That is, if they miss me at all,” Danny took a slow breath in like it would keep the memories at bay. They both knew it wouldn’t.

Ember felt selfish in wishing that he didn’t miss them. Maddie and Jack had been monsters in her eyes for almost a year. She didn't want to face what it would mean if their hunt never actually ended.

Except it didn’t. Danny was right in front of her.

“If they miss me as much as I miss them, then I can never rest. I will never know any moment of peace. I will spend the rest of my life with them at my back trying to tear me apart for the joy of studying my insides,” The flat acceptance of Danny’s voice twisted her own insides.

The punk teen played with the familiar strings beneath her fingers, though neither seemed to hear whatever haunting melody hummed through the room.

*How long had he thought about his mom and dad?*

She wouldn’t miss them after everything was said and done. She’d hate them with every fiber of her being.

*How long did he spend wondering just what their love meant for him?*

And she did. Ember fucking hated the Fentons. The singer tried to hold the bitterness back, but it clawed in her throat like acid.

“I wish you wouldn't,” She spat, “What they did? That was fucked up, Danny.”

“I know,” Danny admitted quietly as he pulled his legs up onto the couch, “I’m not okay with what they did, but I’m okay with how I feel about it all even if it was hard to really process everything. I won’t lie, Ember. It took me a *really,* really long time to feel alright again.”

*The cold runway lights were the only thing that shimmered against the tinted window. It gave Danny a comforting sense of privacy even as he held the air in his lungs steady amongst the crowd of sleeping strangers. No sounds came from his crying . He stared at the contact in his phone simply labeled “Home”. The thing was, he would never forget the number. That had lived in his memory ever since mom had helped him memorize when he was younger.*

*No. It was the picture for the contact. Just some stupid picture he’d taken because Jazz had looked dumb with twigs stuck in her hair as she stomped into the house after a horrible camping trip. It was the only picture of his parents in his phone. Both of them were smiling bright and laughing as they unpacked the GAV in the background. Any physical pictures he’d had of them had been left behind in the scramble.*

*Danny blocked their number before deleting the contact from his phone, and, with it, the last picture he had of his mom and dad.*

*They had never bothered to call anyways.*

*For all that his mom had drilled in the importance of remembering your family's contact information in case of emergencies, it still hurt to accept that she had been the first person to forget. His dad couldn't be counted on to have remembered it in the first place anyways.*

*The murderous faces scarred into the back of his eyes would have to make due.*

"Do you want to see them?" Ember asked after the heavy silence had wormed its way into her bones, "Your crew, I mean, not your parental has-beens."

Danny rubbed his face with a heaving breath. He flopped back against the cushions with a thousand yard stare that seemed to match the punk rocker's own. It didn't make his expression any less serious, and it didn't lift the heavy weight that seemed to pull at Danny's shoulders.

"I want to, but I hope I never see Jazz again. I hope I never see the day where I meet my niece or nephew. I hope Sam and Tucker stay far away. I hope Dani runs to the other side of the world."

"Baby Pop…"

"If it means the government doesn't hunt me across the seas, and Dani can start fresh elsewhere, I don't mind staying in the States," Danny swore with a heavy tone that didn't sit well in Ember's chest.

In the quiet of the dressing room, with only Danny to see her, Ember found herself cracking under his words.

“Tucker may have given me a new identity, but at the end of the day, the safest option for everyone is if I stay a homeless nobody. I really don’t mind it. I would give everything up if it meant that they got everything they ever wanted out of life,” Danny explained as if it was the most normal thing in the world, though the heavy sadness in his tone couldn’t be masked, “That means that I can't be there to see their lives happen. ”

As much as she saw, the idea of what they could do, what they could learn, what they could one day achieve if they ever got their hands on Danny choked her in a way she didn’t expect. But…

*Was it selfishness to run?*

*Would it be selfish to stay?*

*Make everyone live a life without you as you watch the stars and wonder…*

*… Or keep your life for yourself and damn the consequences.*

“How do you cope with that?” Ember scowled at her guitar as if letting herself stay angry would burn the fear that itched at her soul even as the bitter tune sprang forth from the strings. It wouldn’t, not after considering what it meant to throw it all away. Not after the hell she’d lived every single day with his betrayed eyes haunting her at every moment.

If he was honest, it wasn’t a song Danny was used to hearing.

His own acceptance had come in the solitude of cityscapes and bus rides across miles of open roads. The sheer days and weeks he’d spent pouring over everything from start to finish had brought him a sense of peace and relief. To face everything that had happened, and

everything that he had felt about the day where everything had gone wrong, had been harder than he knew how to share.

For Ember, no solitary peace had ever arrived.

She relived it every time she faced crowds of thousands who chanted her name and demanded more. For her, the option to sit in her feelings and figure out what it meant wasn't an option. She rebelled against a world that condemned the one she knew fought harder than anyone to save it. The betrayal and injustice burned in her veins as she screamed her mourning into the spotlights.

It felt right, *was right,* and yet she couldn't place why it still hurt so much.

Seeing Danny lifted a heavier weight from her shoulders than Ember realized. No longer would she wonder about what had happened to Dipstick, but the betrayed eyes and pleas for her to leave him behind still echoed in her ears.

"A lot of reflection," He answered after a bit, "I had nothing but time on my hands and the solitude to think about it over and over, wondering just how I could have avoided it. Wondering if I fucked it all up. I realized somewhere along the way that it didn't really matter much," Danny spoke carefully.

He played with the damp denim that clung to his legs and made his skin crawl.

"Knowing that the likelihood of being accepted was low helped. Same with knowing that I got lucky. Sam and Tucker had been prepared for the worst for a while. We'd… had some close calls before. Guess they weren't taking risks anymore," The halfa shrugged.

"You act like *this,"* Ember stressed as she waved a hand at Danny, "Was the best outcome. Dude, you're a homeless fugitive."

“Honestly? I think it was. It's a lot harder to find someone with no ties. Yeah, I have ID, but there's no house or apartment to track down, or bank account, or job. I don’t know if I want to risk something like that so soon. Then again, I don’t know if I ever want to do that,” Danny admitted quietly, “Sam, Tucker, and Jazz seem to think that I can restart. They’re right. I can, but the risk if I do is…. High. Very high.”

Ember scoffed and smacked her hand down on the arm of her chair, “Isn’t that the goal? A normal fucking life?”

“Being normal was the funniest joke I could have ever thought of," Danny scoffed dismissively, “And I know that being normal, or at least pretending to be that, is a guaranteed death sentence. The day they catch up with me, the day that they *catch me,* I won’t be ready. I’ll be too busy stuck pretending to be normal. They would kill me in a heartbeat and study the corpse I leave behind to learn more about how we tick. They would sooner rip apart every one of us for power than even consider us to be any sort of sentient.”

The neck of her guitar seemed to creak as she gripped it, absently plucking the faintest of chords like a bandaid to the uncomfortable truth of their situation.

The steel in his voice seemed to cut through Ember in a way the halfa had never seen before even as he whispered just above a breath, “Even before Clockwork decided to tell me I was the Ghost King, there was no chance of me ever being a regular kid again. I will never live a normal life. *I can’t.”*

The silence that fell in the air of Danny’s damn near broken confession was suffocating.

“I did,” Ember shrugged nonchalantly, “Me and the crew. We used the reputation we had already built in Amity. We established ourselves as a pop rock band, and toured like crazy. Never said where we were from, no one knows, and it's part of the allure. I did it. I was normal. I was loved.”

Ember paused consideringly in the silence as Danny lounged on the warm cushions, “Of course, the cult of followers because I’m openly a Meta was a bonus,” She acknowledged pointedly.

“It wasn’t real until I was touring the world, you know,” Ember admitted as her fingers idly found themselves tuning the familiar strings, “You’ve been crashing my gigs for so long that every concert was a sign that the gang had been right all along. You died.”

“Rude, by the way,” Danny teased with a ghost of a smirk across his face, “To speculate about my perma-death like that.”

“Well, I think you would have felt the same way that I did, Baby Pop,” Ember scowled, but there was no malice in her voice, “We got to safety, but apparently you left before us. A couple of my crew was torn to shreds by the fucking Fenton Peeler in seconds.”

“I’m sorry,” Danny murmured as he pushed forwards, moving to the other side of the couch. He laid a hand on the arm of Ember’s chair, “They were a great crew. I think they would be happy knowing you got out.”

“...I think they'd rather be here too, but thanks,” Ember carefully took his hand as the last note she’d plucked faded into obscurity.

It felt like a breath of fresh air.

“For what it’s worth, Ember? You made it. You did great,” Danny promised as he squeezed, “But if you ever want to go home…”

“... Thanks, Baby Pop. That means a lot to me.”

*It wasn’t necessarily Danny’s fault. He’d tried keeping the peace for too long.*

*He had known something was wrong, but he didn't know how wrong things were until his dad's hands were almost pining him to the ceiling after his dad barged in. He was angrier than Danny had ever seen him and he dug his fingers into his throat with a prejudice Danny hadn't even seen in his nightmares.*

Danny and Ember had just settled into the heavy but comfortable silence when a series of knocks rang out.

"Company?" Danny asked with a cheeky grin as he pushed himself up from the couch.

"No?" Ember denied as she eyed the clock on the wall, "Backstage stuff doesn't happen for a little bit."

Danny smirked as he crossed the room to the door. He grabbed the knob and teased "Well, Pop Star, I think your adoring fans are early. Are you ready?"

A slow smirk spread across Ember's face as she pushed herself up. She set her guitar down where she'd been sitting and turned back to the scruffy little shit, "Yeah… Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, knock yourself out," Danny said with a carefree shrug even as he looked at the deep contemplation hidden beneath her cocky exterior.

It wasn't hard to find Ember's green room, but Cass' unease didn't settle as they arrived.

Two voices were coming from the room, though they had to really strain to make anything out in. The dips into hushed tones didn't help, and Babs didn't exactly have time to set up anything especially fancy to amplify sounds.

Steph pressed her ear to the door silently as they tried to pick up whatever they could.

*"...being normal… a guaranteed death sentence. The day they catch up… kill me in a heartbeat and study the corpse…"*

"Holy shit," Steph breathed. Her face twisted as she waved Cass over to listen.

Cass moved her hair behind her ear and pressed her ear to the door.

*"Rude… my perma-death…"*

Cass put a finger to her lips as she listened.

*"...A couple… torn to shreds…"*

When the silence stayed for more than a few seconds at a time, Stephanie pulled away from the door.

"I think someone's hunting Metas?" Stephanie mouthed carefully as she quickly typed down what she'd heard through the door into her phone.

"Not Ember," Cass added on as she spoke under her breath, "A boy. Others."

Barbara frowned and adjusted her glasses, though before she could say anything, Stephanie had reached a hand out and knocked.

Babs didn't have to put her ear to the door to hear the boy ask about company in an upbeat tone. Neither Steph or Cass caught whatever quiet exchange the two had before a shaggy, black-haired teen boy opened the door with a cheeky grin.

He swung the door open with a grand swipe of his arm and leaned against the edge to keep the door open for the three of them.

"May I introduce the punk rocker to end all rockers: Miss Ember McLain!"

"Thanks, Dipstick," Ember snorted as she shot the teen an amused look, "It's really nice to meet you girls. You're a little early, but come on in. Rules are for babies."

Ember held out her hand as Barbara wheeled herself over. She shook her hand with a quick introduction before the celebrity moved on to Cassandra

Steph grinned and thanked the kid who was holding the door open for them as Ember took her hand in a steady grip and welcomed her. As the blonde's eyes moved from the teen at the door towards Ember, the only thing she could muster other than the automatic introduction was the panicked thought of just how vibrantly familiar those eyes were.

From the edge of her vision, the kid's ice blue eyes were the same green that she watched plummet from the sky, narrowly avoiding becoming the next blood smear on the pavement.

# Bravery only lasts until the sun stops glinting off of the gilded brass you carved your confidence into like it would somehow make it all more real than fake

Ember was so charismatic that Danny wanted to vomit sometimes. He watched her easily fill the room and pull the three women into conversations as easily as Danny breathed air. The halfa could practically feel the excitement and mania build within the three of them, though Ember had clearly toned down the allure of her weird little brainwashing.

It helped Danny feel more reassured than he had before.

Ember had grown.

She would be just fine.

“Aw! Shucks, you’re gonna make me cry if you keep telling me how much my music means to ya,” Ember grinned as she held Stephanie’s hand. Ember mimed wiping a tear away with an easy motion, as she flicked her eyes over to Danny pointedly for the briefest of moments as she looked at Cassandra.

Danny caught the look easily. He slid a hand into his pocket and slid his sunglasses out and onto his face with an easy, cheeky grin.

*Thanks, Ember.*

While he didn’t say it out loud, he knew it showed in his expression. Ember gave an easy nod in response, as if to the question Barbara had asked about the album having taken a long time to write. He could imagine her dismissive response.

*Don’t mention it, Dipstick.*

“Nice to see you, but I’ll leave you be. Not my scene, y’know?”

Ember rolled her eyes as she signed the shirt that Barbara was wearing, “Yeah yeah, get out of here. Can’t you see I’m busy hanging out with my fans? Besides, a whole crowd will be here soon. Better dip, Dipstick.”

Danny let out a little laugh as he ducked out into the hallway and vanished into the Gotham air.

From across the rainy street, Danny caught one last look at the ghosts guarding the building, and offered a wave to the one that helped him get in to see Ember before he disappeared into an alley.

It was a weight off of Danny’s shoulders, if he was being honest.

Ember had made it along with her friends, and they were doing well.

Danny and Ember had both gotten away, and until Danny had found Ember, there was no second chance for her to see anyone ever again. Now, Ember had a way to go home that she could reach out to.

The only problem with that was the government wasn’t looking for her at all. Neither were Danny’s parents, and though Ember hadn’t said it, she had known.

She saw it.

When Danny told her to run and never look back, they hadn't spared her a second glance. Maddie and Jack hadn't given a single fuck about her outside of trying to hunt Danny, and the government was a cruel parallel to the Fenton parents.

It was Danny that was being hunted, and they both knew it.

**Danny:** Ember's doing okay

**Danny:** She's fucked up by the

**Danny:** Uh

**Danny:** Everything

**Danny:** But learning I wasn't actually destroyed helped, I think

**Sam:** You didn't stop her concert?

**Danny:** Nah

**Danny:** She's not hurting anyone and she's not taking over

**Danny:** She's just trying to survive

**Sam:** Yeah, we know a fair amount about that

**Sam:** Tucker and I can finally walk around Amity without being shot at by your parents

**Sam:** This server is my one bastion of fucking sanity, and I cannot wait to move as far away from this fucking town as possible.

**Sam:** I don't even care, I'll take Tucker with me

**Sam:** We gotta get the fuck out of here before the damn government kills us and calls it justified

Steph meant to get a moment with the kid hanging out at the corner of the doorway, but the energy and awe of meeting Ember was infectious. Meeting the artist was better than Stephanie had ever hoped, and best of all? Babs and Cass were having just as good of a time.

When it finally occurred to Steph to engage with the teen who'd been kidnapped into the dark skies of Gotham, she realized he'd slipped out of the room a long time ago. Worse yet, she remembered the moment he left clearly, though hadn't reacted at the time.

*"Nice to see you, but I'll leave you be. Not my scene, y'know?"*

And Ember had acknowledged it.

And still, Stephanie had dismissed the brilliant smile beneath half-wet hair that spoke of having been inside only long enough for the hair to partially dry.

"You don't know what you were missing, Timberly. Ember was fucking awesome."

Tim shrugged as he swiveled away from the super computer, "Glad you had a good time."

"I got you a shirt, you goblin," Steph called as she walked away from the entrance and threw a balled up bundle of cloth like she was shooting a basketball.

He didn't even try to move.

The black and blue shirt smacked against his face with little fanfare.

Tim let out a sigh that hid a ghost of a smile, "Thanks Steph, I appreciate you grabbing me something. How was the concert?"

“Dude. *Dude.* It was life changing,” Stephanie ranted as she smacked the space next to the keyboards, “The lights, oh my god, the lights and the lightshow were amazing. Everything was glowing. The stage was covered in water, and the pyrotechnics were fucking bananas, Tim.”

Tim nodded along with an amused smirk, “You got any videos?”

Steph gripped his shirt and shook him like a rag doll, “I have so many videos and also autographs and pictures. That backstage VIP was the best thing I ever bought!”

Tim swore as he gripped her shoulders for balance as the chair wobbled below him, “Sounds like fun,” Tim commented, even as her delight seemed to twist, like an itch she couldn’t scratch, “There wouldn’t happen to be a ‘but’ in this, would there?”

“...Sort of?” Steph’s smile turned down in thought, “It’s not a ‘but’, but it was weird.”

Tim blinked as he pried Steph's fists to let go of his shirt, “That is literally a ‘but’.”

She pretended she didn't hear him.

“The concert was amazing, and I totally get the whole ‘you don’t know what music you’re showing up to’ now. Like, it shouldn't work? But it absolutely does for Ember, and that’s great, but at the end of her last song, she turned away like the villains in the song were coming to get her, and it was breathtaking,” Steph explained as she backed out of Tim’s personal bubble.

Tim pushed himself away from the keyboard and rolled over to the mini fridge Alfred insisted on putting smoothies in, and grabbed an energy drink. He cracked it open, spun back around to listen, and told himself he would grab a smoothie later.

“What was weird was Cass insisting that part wasn’t planned, and that someone had actually shown up. We snuck backstage early, and it turns out it was Ember’s friend, who is a Meta, that someone was trying or had tried to kill him, and he had to run away. Also, Ember had to run too. Maybe. Unclear,” Stephanie sighed as she stole the drink from Tim’s hands and chugged.

Tim stared blankly at his empty hand. He lunged to get his drink back, but watched in resignation as the entire thing vanished.

Steph chucked it across the cave, and cheered when she watched it land in the trash. Tim snorted as he propped his head up on his fist, “Okay, so you obviously talked with this dude, right?”

“Yeah, well, sort of,” Stephanie shrugged. She turned back to Tim with a twisted expression, “I meant to. We all got kinda swept up with Ember. The little we know is ‘cause we overheard them talking.”

“Do you at least remember what this dude looks like?” Tim asked with a frown. Shifted in his seat, pulled open a new file, and prepared to take notes.

“The thing is that he was kinda plain looking,” Her face twisted in concentration, “The thing that fucked me up was the fact that I’ve been seeing his eyes in my fucking nightmares.”

Tim blinked as his face twisted into a mockery of her own expression, “I’m sorry?”

“Yeah, I’m, like, ninety percent sure he’s the kid that Man Bat fucked up,” Steph nodded.

“... Well, fuck, okay. Describe him?” Tim nodded along as he began to type.”

“Well, He’s got shaggy black hair. He’s kinda scuffed up, and he had this massive sweater on with something on underneath. I think his eyes are actually blue and not green like I

thought," Steph described as she ticked off trains on her fingers, but stopped when She didn't hear any typing.

She turned her head to see Tim staring at her. His fingers were paused over the keyboard, paused in the middle of typing.

"What is it?"

"Stephanie, I mean this in the nicest possible way. You are an idiot," Tim said as he pressed his hands together like he was praying for sanity.

"Rude, bitch. What did I ever do to you?" She asked rhetorically as she flicked him in the forehead.

Tim just let it happen.

"Good news, I know who your mystery man is," He said as he closed the new file.

"Oh yeah?" The super fan sassed, "Then who is it, nerd."

He typed in a file code he'd long memorized. He waved his hand towards the screen with little fanfare.

Stephanie's eyes scanned the name on the file with a squint, "Wait a minute, *that's* Dumpster?!"

"Yep," Tim nodded as he typed notes into Tommy's growing file.

*…Confirmed Meta: Possible Terminal Trait, See Blood Result Repor t…*

“So, you mean to tell me that the same person that got fucked up by Man Bat is the same as that homeless kid from the fire.”

*... Confirmed Runaway: Speculative Reasons: Abuse, Meta Discrimination, Trafficking...*

“Yeah,” Tim nodded as he typed up a quick report outlining the basics of what Steph had said regarding the concert. He had a feeling he’d be hearing about how he was making her do more paperwork later on.

After the novelty of pinpointing Dumpster Tommy as Steph’s Mystery Man of the Skies had worn off.

“So a homeless kid got beat to shit, dropped a dozen stories from the sky, got beat to shit more, and got away,” She said as Tim nodded, “And then had to heal whatever broken bones without medical intervention.”

“Most likely.”

“Yeah.”

Silence fell over the cave with a heavy sort of acceptance.

Only the bats within the cave chittered their devastation. Neither brought up the heaving guilt that pulled at Stephanie for failing to save him.

He was okay.

Tommy was alive.

That fact was a hollow comfort.

“So who do you think got to Man Bat?” Stephanie whispered when the thought became too much.

“That’s a good question,” Tim sighed, “I don’t know, but I guess it doesn’t matter for tonight. Go sleep, Steph. You Had a great night. Try not to ruin it too much. Tommy seemed fine, right? So we can deal with all of this another time.”

“Yeah… Yeah, goodnight, nerd,” Steph said softly. She pushed herself away from the desk and trudged up the stairs of the cave, and disappeared into the mansion.

Tim waited for the tell tale sound of the grandfather clock to close the entrance to the cave, glossing over the statuses of Bruce, Damian, and Dick out on their patrols. They’d be out especially late, Tim knew. Damian would push for it without needing to follow the school curfew that all the Robins had gotten stuck dealing with.

Sort of. Tim skipped a lot of it with Bruce lost in the time stream and then also him subsequently dropping out. With Tim running WE in Bruce’s stead for that time, Dick couldn’t exactly tell him to go to bed, and all Damian would do was try to kill him. That hardly counted.

Tim was going to stay in and work on filing, but he didn’t think Alfred would mind him going home for the evening.

When Tim Drake got home to his apartment, he locked the place down. He placed Alfred’s smoothie on his coffee table, turned on his laptop, and ignored the vague tremor in his hands as he hacked Jason’s cell phone.

Tim dialed his number before his common sense could talk him out of it.

When Jason answered, Tim thought hard about just hanging up.

“Who are you and how did you get this number?!”

He didn’t. He was nothing but persistent.

The insomniac took a slow breath, “It’s Tim. Can I run something by you?”

# Forgiveness is a wound one could live without, though they don't tell you how it carves away at you before you trade away the brunt of your rage

**Jazz:** Sometimes I want to hit dad with the Fenton Creepstick 2.0, and then I remember that violence solves nothing.

**Jazz:** They're visiting, and I wish they would visit faster.

**Danny:** The fact that you slipped that particular baton into in my bag has nothing to do with that

**Jazz:** I don't know how it got there.

**Danny:** Absolutely

**Danny:** For the record, since violence solves nothing, I have definitely not used it a couple times during my extended holiday for something other than roasting marshmallows

**Jazz:** Of course not.

**Danny:** Have you tried hurling the dsm-5 at him yet?

**Jazz:** No, but it just might work.

**Jazz:** I'm surprised you know what that is, baby brother.

**Danny:** It's the thickest book you had

**Danny:** Plus it's easy to remember when you use it to beat a ghost over the head with it a couple times.

**Jazz:** So that's where the green stain came from.

**Jazz:** I thought it was dad and his hotdogs.

"Replacement? What the fuck?..." Jason grumbled as he squinted at his cell in the darkness. He returned it to his ear with a scowl, "What is it?"

Tim waited a moment, but Jason didn't hang up. He'd count it as a win when his stomach wasn't twisted into knots.

"I was wondering if you would consider talking with me about Dumpster Tommy," Tim asked slowly. He didn't bother trying to hide the wince from his face at the sensitive subject. It was a shot in the dark, but the kid ran around Hood's area, "For the record, I'm not looking to find him."

"That's what someone looking to find him would say," Jason grumbled quietly through the phone as he rolled over and flopped a head onto Roy's chest.

Danny wasted no time in moving through the alleyways as a weight lifted from his shoulders but settled deep in the halls of his heart.

Not for the first time, Danny wondered if he would be a good enough King. The bar may have been on the ground, but still. The thought lingered like the cold that seeped from his fingertips.

Ember had made something of herself. Danny would make sure she got to keep that life.

The teen felt a playful, somber smile creep across his face as green eyes flickered in the dark of the alley as he pocketed his sunglasses.

Maybe the irony of the Ghost King watching his subjects live was worth the stupid ring and title. He couldn't think of the last time he'd seen Ember so… whole.

Hurt and traumatized, yes, but… whole.

Danny didn't need to wonder whether or not part of the heavy feeling that resided in his chest was the feeling of peace. Despite the sorrow and anxiety that Danny often found himself dealing with, he knew with certainty that his was a hard-earned peace.

He hoped he would be a good king. Danny had a feeling he was already better than average, but the "average" was trapped forever in a coffin. The halfa took a breath and felt the coarse bricks beneath his shoes as he moved quickly from street to street under the careful patter of the Gotham rain.

Jazz had always told him he was stubborn, and they both knew he wouldn't just let it go.

*"Are you happy?"*

*Danny couldn't help the smile that warmed his face even if he tried, "Yeah, actually. I really am… Strange, isn't it? You'd think that I shouldn't be, but I am."*

Dick was all too happy to cover Tim's portion of the patrols. His little brother had been working himself to the bone lately. The poor guy deserved time off. He pushed down the guilt that tried to rear its head for pushing Tim so hard.

The acrobat took a deep, reassuring breath as he swung across the rooftops and landed gracefully at the edge of a building's ledge. He could fix things with Tim, and had been working hard to do so for a long time. Tim wasn't Jason.

Dick wasn't unforgivable.

*Tim wasn't Jason.*

The vigilante stared down at the nightlife below and did his best to push back the guilt of his failures.

"Is it my turn to ask you to get back from the ledge?"

The years of brutal fighting had Dick turning with his escrima drawn and charged in spite of the friendly teasing tone. His eyes settled across the rooftop as someone rested their head casually on  their arms as they hung from the edge. Familiar eyes peered in amusement back at Dick from under the hood of black.

"I mean, if you wanna play, I got a pretty okay baton for self-defense kicking around, but I feel like the electricity isn't fair," Tommy teased with a smirk as he pulled himself fully onto the roof.

"Tommy," Nightwing breathed as he righted the weapons in his hands. He returned them to his back with an embellished flick, "Nah, we don't need to rough house. It's good to see you."

*It's good to see you alive,* Dick thought, but knew better than to say it.

Tommy shrugged dismissively and stuffed his hands in his pocket, "It's been awhile, yeah, but also I haven't really been back to Bludhaven, you know? Been busy and all that."

"You know, I don't doubt that for a second," Nightwing grinned as he reached over and ruffled the kids hair, "Other than being *busy,* how've you been?"

The lack of weariness from Tommy was a balm to Dick's own heart as the teen settled next to him at the edge of the roof. As much as he wanted to fix all of Tommy's worries when the

injured teen had agreed to come home with him, Dick knew better than most that sometimes the best thing to do was listen.

“Pretty good, actually,” Tommy grinned. The black haired teen punched the vigilante’s shoulder playfully as he continued, “I’m all healed up. No bullets, no bandages.”

“That’s great! You were in pretty rough shape last time I saw you,” Nightwing beamed as he risked bringing Tommy in for a playful shoulder hug. He let go after a moment even when Tommy did nothing to resist. Dick didn’t want to push it.

“Well, I mean, can you blame me?” Tommy raised an eyebrow.

Dick snorted, “Not one bit, but I’m happy to see you not looking so miserable and lonely.”

*Scared,* Dick’s mind whispered traitorously even as the vulnerable form of Tommy curled on his house curdled into one of the rare instances where Jason had watched a movie with him, *Of you. Wary of how you could hurt him.*

“If you could see what I see, maybe people wouldn’t think I was so lonely,” Danny grumbled in annoyance.

“Oh yeah? Well, I wanna see, if you wanna tell me,” Dick offered as he swallowed back the pain in his chest at the memory of Jason.

As a cool breeze in the break of the downpour swept through the neighborhood, it was hard to not find peace in the ambient silence of cars or the glow of the streetlamps as they cast the city in glittering gold.

Danny couldn’t help the warm smile that crossed his face as he looked at the hero. Even with a break in the shitty weather, the hero's shoulders looked heavier than his own had felt in a long time.

*He can't run like you can.*

*How often had he stared at his ringed hand in the dark of the alleys?*

"I have awesome friends I talk with all the time, and I've made friends too. I don't think anyone would want to be in the situation I'm in, Nightwing, but…. I think I prefer this to anything that could have been."

"Part of that, I guess, was shitty parents?" Nightwing asked, "Though, feel free to correct me if I got the wrong impression."

"Nah, you're pretty on the nose. My relationship with my parents…" Danny trailed off as the image of his mom and dad glaring at him moments before he shut the portal down flashed in his brain. It was the last time they would work together to do anything. Not that they had wanted that. Not that they had known. "... Didn't end on the best of notes, you know?"

Dick nodded with an empathetic, sad smile.

He knew as well as any Robin would ever know. After all, he failed and failed others in return.

Dick knew it very well.

"You wanna go grab a burger?" Dick asked, "Or I can go, you can hang out here, and we can catch up."

Danny snorted but shrugged, "Sure. You look like you could use the company."

The flicker of something in Tommy's eyes told Nightwing that the street kid knew that his observation wasn't wrong, but he wouldn't push it either. He shot his grapple into the night before leaping from the edge.

It was paranoia that replaced Dumpster's knowing expression with Jason's.

"I just wanted to know how likely you thought it was that Tommy's sick."

Jason didn't bother to hide the scorn in his tone, "And why do you care, exactly."

"I just do," Tim scowled as the memory of the teen in the cafe flashed in his mind, "Why do you want to know so bad?"

"Why do you want to know about his supposed street kid?" Jason grunted back dismissively, "Because him being a street kid is the only reason you'd bother calling me of all people."

Tim let the silence hang for a moment. He took a breath, "A while ago, after the Crime Alley fire…"

"Right, right, the neighborhood tried burning to the ground. I'm vaguely familiar. Bruce was pissed as per usual. Go on."

"...Well, we were collecting samples to test against known identities and substances to see if we could find anything. We didn't find anything for what was going on with the gang war, but someone's blood sort of sparked red flags," Tim explained reluctantly, "It decayed so quickly. I ran so many tests, but the only thing that I could really tell was that the blood decayed into nothing after a couple hours."

“Oh yeah?” Jason asked warily as he rolled off of Roy and sat up in bed.

“Yeah, well, it’s not ideal,” Tim frowned as he anxiously fiddled with the material of his jeans, “That kind of strain on the body… I think the only reason he’s not dead would be if he’s a Meta, and even then, it feels like a time bomb.”

Jason unknowingly mirrored Tim’s frown from across the city as Snacks’ words haunted the fringes of his mind.

*“Nah, nothing like cancer.”*

That fucking little shit.

“What makes you think that it’s this Dumpster kid?”

“The blood came from the last known location Dick saw him in, and we knew he got shot in the crossfire.”

“And why does any of this matter to you?” A dark expression fell over the crime lord’s face, “People die all the time.”

Eating burgers on a wet-ass rooftop with the same hero who tended to look like a kicked puppy from the corner of his eyes wasn’t as awkward as he thought it would be. He wasn’t worried Nightwing would make him stay, or force him into going anywhere.

Maybe that he’d be forced to eat a third burger, but that was it.

Nightwing himself seemed to look less likely to smother him into some semblance of a caring-oblivion at the slightest drop of a pin. Whether that was because the colour had returned to Danny's skin, because he wasn't actively oozing liquid from his insides, or because of some other reason, Danny couldn't say.

Danny told the hero about the little things he'd been up to, and watched the weight melt from his shoulders as he spoke about life after the end of a family.

As devastating as it was, he supposed it was reassuring to have someone tell you the world kept spinning with or without you.

*"Even if you're the King now, you'll never stop being a dork. You know that, right?"*

***Nothing's changed between us. You know that, right?***

*Danny cracked a warm smile as he gripped the handle of the door. It felt like acceptance.*

*"... Thanks, Ember."*

"It should matter. You should've mattered. Second chances like yours never happen, and I'm sorry."

"For the little it's worth, I'm sorry, too."

# What do you mean he had glowing green eyes? An essay by Damian Wayne about the stupidity of claiming a concert with glow in the dark effects, neon lights, pyrotechnics, and a lightshow by a Meta with fire hair is a good place to find things that glow

Chapter Notes

hello lovelies, sorry i'm not posting much. A lot's going on, and i also keep having family emergencies including a month long one that has ended with a death. i'm not having the best of times irl and haven't been able to bring myself to write. also my chronic conditions have been kicking my ass (and yeah, that includes 2023's new addition of facial nerve damage/jaw pain. honestly, 2023 has been hella rough in general, but it is what it is).

i'd like to be more sentimental, but i've been through a lot. i'm grieving, and i think i'm going to spend the rest of this year doing that if it's all the same to you. also some of 2024.

i hope you had a good 2023. see you in 2024, whenever it is that i see you. happy new year.

"What do you think, Buddy?" Duke asked as he scrolled through his laptop. He tilted the screen towards the snowman as it sat on the couch. The soft glow of the chilled smile reflected the light as the Meta scrolled through the fifth baby supply website.

"I think this is the first harness that would actually fit you," Duke hummed as he added an item to the cart.

As he paid for Buddy's new baby carrier, the phantom sound of bubbling laughter fluttered at the edge of his mind like twinkling stars.

When Drake had approached him about how Tom was a Meta, Damian didn't exactly take it well. He knew that.

*"I respect you and your conclusion on this matter, Drake, but Brown's idiocy in this discussion warrants absolutely no confidence in this conclusion!" Damian snarled, "As if contacts do not exist, and as if she and the others were not standing next to a Meta who, might I be so crass to remind you, has blue fire for hair. This is not even acknowledging that the entire affair utilized specialized lighting and pyrotechnics!"*

However, Brown's idiocy about insisting things at a punk rave with neon lighting was proof of anything other than how she could perceive light. She wasn't even special in that regard. That honour went to Thomas.

*"Damian," Tim sighed as he cracked a blue raspberry energy drink that tasted more like caffeine dyed blue than whatever the fuck blue raspberry was, "Does that matter if its the same guy?"*

It didn't change the hurt he'd felt at the prospect of Tom having a fatal Meta gene, or that his siblings had been obsessing over his friend, trying to hunt him down when all Tom seemed to want was peace, quiet, and space to roam.

*"Of course it matters!"*

Even as he stormed off in anger, Damian didn't point out Timothy's marked shift from a manufactured calm to a vague amusement.

A month ago, his brother would have stayed forcibly calm, or a resigned tension would have found its way to his shoulder blades.

The assassin figured it was what Thomas would call "progress."

Damian figured he would call it his shame.

When Buddy’s sling came in, he made the best of it by immediately heading to Wayne Manor with Buddy in tow, or rather, in sling.

He paid no mind to the cab driver who kept shooting him awkward glances in the mirror up until the car pulled up to the gates.

“I gotta know,” The cab driver said in a rush as Duke leaned forward to tap his card against the meter.

“Uh, yeah?” Duke asked as he slipped his card back into his wallet.

“What’s with the snowman?”

“Oh, you didn’t know?” Duke asked as he flicked sunglasses onto his face, “It’s the Wayne Family Summer Costume Party Extravaganza.”

“Oh… Well, that's really neat. Hope you have a blast,” The cab driver said as their eyes glanced at the snowman in the baby carrier in confusion, “What are you anyways?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Duke smirked. He pulled out a pair of yellow kid-sized sunglasses and slid them onto Buddy’s face, “I’m Mr. Freeze’s babysitter.”

Outside of dumb luck and risking having to pretend to get kidnapped to keep his civilian status as rich heir safe when exploring Crime Alley, the best way to find Tom was to go to Robinson Park. It was where Damian found him the most.

This afternoon was no different, and that was a balm to Damian's overprotective rage.

Not five minutes of searching the park, and he'd found Tom tucked away in a more secluded section beneath a tree that seemed to be changing colours earlier than the others within the park.

"Thomas!" Damian called out as he got closer. Even at a distance, he could still see Tom's good-natured resignation before he smiled.

"Damian! It's been a while."

"It has," Damian nodded.

The closer he got, the more he could see how Tom was painting his nails in the shade.

Tom grinned as he wiggled his half-painted finger's over at Damian, showing off the iridescent black polish, "Whatcha think? But when you answer, do me a solid and ignore the mess around my actual nails."

"Passable."

Tom chuckled to himself as Damian sat down next to him in the grass. The disheveled teen dipped the brush back in the bottle.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm not the best at nail stuff, but it's fun, and the polish was given, so I'm gonna do what I do best," Tom hummed as he smeared the polish across his nail, both too thin and too thick.

“What is it that you do best?” Damian asked as he watched.

“Oh, you know,” Tom drawled as he finished his hand, put the brush back into the bottle, and waved his hand around to dry it faster, “Fuck around, find out, and fuck up nail polish.”

“I figured you were going to say ‘surviving’ considering how dangerous Gotham is,” Damian said with a pointed coldness.

He watched as a laugh forced its way from Tom’s chest, and felt his own chest tighten in response.

It was the same bright, cynical laughter he’d heard from others when something caught them off guard, and often when something was too ridiculous to ignore.

“Hell *no,”* Tom denied with a dismissive wave, as if throwing something over his shoulder, “I’m good at getting into shit. Getting out is questionable, but doable… *Sometimes* doable,” He amended after a moment, “Usually with consequences.”

Damian closed his eyes and nodded solemnly, “It is always admirable to change a situation to your advantage.”

“Speaking of…” Tom said with a mischievous tone.

“Of what?”

*“Of what,* he says,” Tom snorted softly as  he looked over his nails languidly. He shrugged and started on his other hand, “Changing things to your advantage. Did you end up doing anything about those jerks bullying you?”

The al Ghul sat in silence for a moment. He nodded slowly, “I did. I told my brothers.”

“Older or younger?” Tom asked with a raised eyebrow.

“They are older than me. I am the youngest,” Damian offered.

Tom let out a low whistle, “Man, I bet it was glorious.”

“I wish it to have been more,” Damian admitted softly. He knew that most of them would recover from Todd’s actions. It would take a lot of time and effort, but they would. The ones that weren’t old money may have had a huge chunk of their future prospects removed from their reach, but for the most part, Damian knew it wouldn’t truly ruin their lives, “I admit it is bitter thinking on my part.”

“Eh, it’s just how it goes sometimes,” Tom dismissed as he slung an arm over Damian’s shoulders and pulled him into a one armed hug, “Personally, I’ve learned that sometimes murder should be okay. I’m sorry you couldn’t murder your problems.”

Damian tensed beneath Tom’s arm, but didn’t shove him away. He didn’t want to ruin Tom’s nails or spill the bottle, “I, too, regret not having the ability to dispose of that scum. However, that cannot be done.”

His friend let out a care-free laugh.

Damian couldn’t help but ruminate over everything he’d learned of his friend, and how much he had suffered to enjoy whatever freedom he had left.

The anger he felt for his family’s pastime of keeping track of Tom rose in his chest.

His friend gave him a pensive look for a moment before he spoke, “Maybe next time, Damian, and if you ever need to pin the blame on someone, you can always pin it on me.”

“Why would you offer such a thing?” Damian snapped defensively, though Tom remained, as he always seemed to in the face of Damian’s harsh anger, unaffected.

“Why not?” Tom countered lightly, “You're my friend, and besides, it's not like it would ruin my life.”

Duke made himself right at home in the infirmary, knowing full well that Alfred would follow him down as soon as dinner was put in the oven.

What he hadn’t expected, but probably should have, was how Bruce was the one to show up to check on his recovery.

“Hey Bruce, how’s it going?” Duke asked from his spot, perched on the edge of one of the beds.

He pushed the sunglasses up to sit on top of his head as Bruce looked him over.

“I should be asking you that, I think,” Bruce smiled, though his eyes settled down at the snowman wearing small yellow sunglasses on a face of blue-green glass beads curved in a friendly smile. The little snowman was sitting securely in a yellow and black baby carrier that had the word *“Buddy”* embroidered in white across the front.

“I see you’ve noticed my best friend,” Duke hummed as he leaned back. He gave a theatrical gesture to Buddy, “This is my lovely roommate, Buddy.”

“I… see,” Bruce said as he checked over Duke, “Is it a fancy cold pack?”

“Uh, no? He’s a snowman. I thought that was clear, Bruce,” Duke said with a raised eyebrow as  he patiently put up with Bruce’s check-up, “Of course he’s cold. Not, like, *cold* -cold, but cold- *cold* , you know? Cold.”

“...Yes?” Bruce asked after a moment.

“Liar,” Duke snorted.

Bruce  gave a warm smile, “You got me. Maybe I don’t get it, but You seem to be having fun, so who am I to crash your party?”

“Damn straight,” Duke agreed.

“Besides, if your recovery coping mechanism is an emotional support toy snowman, then I think you could have done a lot worse,” Bruce smiled as he clapped Duke’s shoulder, “But you’re all recovered. I’ll let Alfred know.”

“For the record, Bruce, Buddy’s not a toy snowman, even if you *are* right about the ‘emotional support’ part,” Duke gave a thumbs up even as he frowned. He opened his mouth to speak, but shut it at the last second.

“What’s on your mind?” Bruce asked as he propped himself up on the edge of the infirmary bed next to Duke.

Duke shrugged, “Nah, don't worry about it. It’s not something you’d be comfortable talking about.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Bruce admitted, “But you wanted to talk, and I’ve been trying to get better at listening.”

“Why would you value your life to be less than mine?! That is outrageous!”

“Not everyone sees things your way, Damian,” Danny grinned as he let his friend go. He finished his other hand before carefully closing the bottle. He slipped it into his pocket carefully before relaxing against the tree. He teased, “Not saying you are, have, or will kill a man, but, you know, the offer’s open. Pin it on a ghost, you know?”

Damian didn’t see the humour.

Danny wasn’t about to point out how hilarious it was. He was pretty sure that Damian still wouldn’t think it was funny anyways.

He’d tell Tucker and Sam later. They’d find it funny.

“Eh, forget it, Damian,” Danny smiled softly, “It’s alright. What else have you been up to?”

Damian stared at him for a long time before he said anything.

“I have been reconnecting with my brothers,” He said softly, “I am working to mend what I broke.”

Danny hummed in acknowledgement.

“Wanna talk about it?” Danny offered, “I got time before I should head out. I don’t mind.”

Duke was silent for a while before he turned to Bruce with a thoughtful expression, “Bruce, you said I could have done a lot worse than snowman as a coping mechanism.”

The silence hung in the air for a moment. Bruce’s frown deepened. Duke continued before he could say anything.

“I’d ask you what you meant, but I think we both know that you meant Jason,” The daylight hero said plainly, “I’m not going to sit here and talk in circles about it by giving you that kind of open-ended escape.”

“Duke, that’s not what I meant.”

“Bruce, maybe you’re too stuck in your own head to notice this, but that’s *always* what you mean,” Duke countered, “When Jason became the standard, you still damned his actions. How many lectures did you give about failure in the field? And you defined it as *Jason,* as if you didn’t define yourself by the same failure.”

“Jason was a great Robin!” Bruce interjected as he stood from the bed.

Duke didn’t give him the opportunity to claim a moral high ground as he stood in front of Bruce.

“He was. Nothing about him was a failure, and *yet,* Bruce, you *made him one,”* Duke stated firmly as he caught and held Bruce’s pointed eye contact, “To the victor goes the spoils, Bruce, and that was no different. It’s easier to raise the standard than to admit that standards are painful sometimes. There wasn’t a thing you could do except to criticize and raise those standards to painful levels.”

Duke waited a moment as he looked over Bruce's face.

"What happened with Jason isn't the same, Duke. I know you know this," Bruce defended.

"Yeah, but do you? Because he didn't come back wrong. He came back needing a dad who'd accept him in spite of everything," Duke pointed out.

Bruce grit his teeth, "I can't accept him killing!"

"Yeah, that's why he went no contact. You were never going to pick him over the standards you set for what it means to be good. 'I know you can do better' isn't the same when you're his personal hell, Bruce!" Duke yelled as he poked his chest, "And you *can* accept killing, Bruce. Don't lie to yourself. Diana kills. Oliver kills. Damian killed."

"Damian was a child—"

*"—Jason was a child!"* Duke interrupted, "Before Damian ever came along, when Red Hood first debuted as a Crime Lord. He was a *child,* Bruce. Just a teenager."

The silence felt bitter in the back of Duke's throat, but he let it sit anyway as he watched devastation flicker beneath Bruce's indifferent mask.

"Damian stopped killing. Jason knew what he was doing," Bruce countered.

"...That's it?" Duke asked with careful neutrality, "Damian chose to follow *your* code, therefore he's acceptable."

"We aren't the law, Duke. We cannot kill," Bruce scowled, "We're no better than those we fight."

“If you really cared about the law to that extent, then you shouldn’t be a vigilante at all. You made an entire organization of illegal crime fighters, then had them legalized by the government. Members of that organization kill whether or not you endorse it. You cannot continue to raise standards until things bend to the will of what you want them to be, even if you're striving for the ultimate good of people,” Duke dismissed with an annoyed wave of his hand.

“The ends justified the means, Duke,” Bruce defended weakly.

“I mean, did they? Because your version of good looks like it made a family of emotionally traumatized glass canons to me… Me included, probably. I’m not immune to my environment,” Duke hummed thoughtfully, “And pretty much all of them have some sort of issue with you because of your standards.”

Bruce said nothing as he stood in front of Duke with his fists clenched. It reminded Duke of people who just needed *something, anything* to hold onto to keep it together, but who only had themselves.

He figured it wasn’t far from the truth, and ignored the flickering light impressions of tears that weren’t there yet.

“You’re such a toxic optimist, Bruce,” Duke said with a deep exhaustion, “You're the *‘I can fix him’* of the hero community, and what you can’t fix is your own faults. *No one’s perfect, Bruce.* I know you know this, but maybe it’s time to stop deluding yourself into whatever destructive cycle sends you striving for improvement instead of just meeting people where they are. Sometimes you just need to stop and deal with your own damage. Stop inflicting it on others.”

Bruce said nothing.

Duke couldn’t figure out what rested below his carefully put together stoicism.

“Maybe I haven’t been around as long as everyone else, Bruce, but at the end of the day, I don’t need your approval. I was Robin without you. I was a vigilante before this. I can be one

after you. Everyone else is the same," Duke said firmly as he held a hand out in a motion for Bruce to wait even though he'd stopped offering weak defenses, "Bruce, your standards aren't even reachable by you. You're pushing everyone away while yanking them back to arms length."

He let his arm fall back to his side with a heavy heart.

It had weighed on him since Damian had asked for his help, though he'd noticed long before. They all had. They all had done what they could.

Duke hoped he'd be the last.

"You think they can do better? You want *them* to do better?" Duke asked rhetorically, "You should start with yourself. Maybe it's time to talk with a therapist…"

He trailed off. He snatched his shades from his head and ruffled his hair as he moved through the infirmary, "But yeah, thanks for listening. I appreciate it."

*"Duke, wait."*

Bruce called as Duke approached the entrance of the infirmary. The Meta paused in the doorway. He took a slow breath as he turned back around with Buddy.

He met Bruce's gaze without hesitation, and they both stood still in the quiet of the cave.

"Thank you," Bruce said softly, "For telling me, I mean… It's… You're right. It wasn't comfortable, but I needed to hear you. I've been getting that a lot lately. It's no wonder why, is it?"

"Not if you heard us, no," Duke acknowledged.

“I… I heard you,” Bruce said quietly, “I hear you.”

A lighter silence drifted between them for a moment before Duke nodded.

“Thanks for checking on my concussion, Bruce,” He smiled and slipped his shades back on, “If anyone asks, my babysitter costume was your favourite.”

“Babysitter costume?” Bruce asked with an amused air.

“Yeah, for the Wayne Family Summer Costume Party Extravaganza,” Duke explained flippantly, “Of course my costume as Mr. Freeze’ babysitter was the best. I’ve got Buddy, and his carrier matches his sunglasses.”

“Ah, I see,” Bruce nodded, "I suppose it was the best costume at the… Wayne Family Summer Costume Party Extravaganza, you said?”

“Uh-huh, me and Buddy are killing it.”

“I still don’t understand the snowman bit.”

“It’s a Meta thing. Don’t worry about it,” Duke grinned, “Later Bruce, and thanks again for listening. It’s been on my mind for a while.”

# when you know what you have lost, you will understand what you will never hope to gain, and gain that which you never hope to lose.

Chapter Notes

> Hi lovelies, I just wanted to give everyone a bit of an update I suppose: my 2024 is quite a bit of a shitshow, and we are balling into the sun. I feel a bit like Icarus if I'm being honest. I haven't been actively interacting many places, and I'm really trying to fix this because I miss writing, making memes, and posting and I also miss hanging out on the batpham discord — I'm just kinda drowning atm? So, yeah. I miss creating things. Probably not the update you wanted to hear but alas, it is what it is ✨

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Danny didn't actually spend that long listening to Damian unload about his family, but he had a pretty good feeling that it was actually really long for someone like Damian who was mostly  reserved, set on dealing with things on his own.

By the end of it, Danny had Damian repainting his nails because his poor friend looked like he either needed something to fidget or he was going to strangle the next person who pissed him off.

By the time Damian left, Danny's nails looked a lot cleaner. It felt a lot like a thank you.

He wouldn't embarrass his friend by calling him out. Instead, he just waved his friend off and pulled his phone free from the confines of his pocket when Damian was out of sight.

**Danny:** Hey Jazz

**Danny:** Remind me that we should find some time to call soon, I miss you

**Danny:** I know your shits on silent during class time and studying, so don't hate me for dumping and running

**Danny:** As that is what I do Professionally ™, hence the nickname

**Danny:** But I just wanted to let you know I'm doing okay, jokes aside. I know you worry

**Danny:** Got a good friendship going with my sewer friends

**Danny:** I've got a friend who's like two or three years younger, I don't know.

**Danny:** His situation sounds like it's getting better

**Danny:** Speaking of situations, I don't think I really wanted to say it

**Danny:** Like, it's so stupid

**Danny:** But since yoinking the ring from sleeping beauty, my powers have kinda spiraled out of control a little bit?

**Danny:** Sort of

**Danny:** I don't know how strong they are anymore, and the last time I had a breakdown I leveled a chunk of Gotham

**Danny:** So now I have to use them more because at least then I'll know how far is too far

**Danny:** Well, that's the hope, anyways

**Danny:** I wish I noticed sooner that my powers were spiraling out of control

**Danny:** I wouldn't have been so careless when I used them? I dunno

**Danny:** I wanna say I would have been more careful

**Danny:** Careful kinda died with me when I was 14 though

**Danny:** I love you

**Danny:** I miss you

He paused as his fingers tapped anxiously against the smudged screen.

***Danny:*** *I'm so sorry for everything…*

…Danny erased the apology as he let the dream of living life with his sister being a constant thorn him his side fall through his fingers. He knew that kind of dream was a lost cause.

He'd let go of it a long time ago. It didn't mean he hadn't mourned the separation any less in the months he'd been gone.

The halfa slid his phone into his pocket. He let out a tired sigh as he left the park and wandered back into the familiar labyrinth of back lanes and alleyways to find a place to sleep for the first time in way too long.

"Alfred, I'm heading out," Bruce announced as he leaned himself against the doorframe of the kitchen.

"At this time? Usually you're preparing to venture out into the night," Alfred said pointedly as  stirred the pot on the stove. When his guardian turned to look him over, he knew he wasn't getting away with hiding his tears in the caverns of the cave.

He shouldn't be surprised. Alfred was used to dealing with him hiding his emotions.

"I won't make you discuss what exactly happened when I left you to evaluate Master Duke's healing concussion. However, if I speak with him, and he's upset as you were, I shall be very unhappy, Master Bruce," Alfred assured firmly.

Bruce let out a tired laugh as he shook his head, "No, Alfred, it was good. It wasn't anything I didn't need to hear. I… We had a good talk. Duke had a lot of things he needed me to hear, is all, and I needed to shut up and listen for once. I haven't been."

Alfred stood quietly. Something seemed to lift from his shoulders as he turned back to the stove, "It's about time that you come to your senses, young man. You've been quite deaf to reason for too long."

“I know, Alfred…” Bruce said softly. He rubbed his face and glanced at his watch, “Ah, I’ve got to go. With any luck, I’ll find Langstrom at his lab. His security feed says he’s there currently, but I might not catch him before he goes home.”

Danny found himself wandering back to the familiar grime of Crime Alley without much thought, but that was fine by him. He was too tired to think.

He paid no attention to the scattered light across the windows, though there hadn’t been a day since his wail he could fully ignore the windows that had no replacement panes, and instead were patched with whatever people had on hand.

It fit in with the rest of the neighborhood: a patchwork of those lucky enough to keep going.

Maybe that was why Danny fit in so well.

It was weird to effectively be making a social call in the early Gotham evening. Kirk’s lab was one he’d visited many times as the scientist’s friend.

As Bruce parked his car in the lot beneath the building, he found himself struggling to recall the last time he had hung out with someone for the sake of their company. Tonight would not be the night to change that considering he was checking on Langstrom for his vigilante work.

He buzzed the intercom with his trademark Brucie grin, “Hey, Kirk!”

Nothing.

“Aw, c’mon, no time for an old friend?” Bruce teased through the intercom.

When the scientist once again didn’t respond, Bruce decided he would let himself in.

The world’s best detective thought, like many other times before, that something, anything, would be off about the reception area or the following familiar hallways, but that wasn’t true in the slightest. Even pulling up the camera feed for the building, he could see Kirk working on something at his desk.

Haphazard experiments littered the space around Kirk in various states of testing, though half seemed to be abandoned carelessly.

It wasn’t like Kirk.

Attentive, brilliant Kirk who kept such a meticulous lab, and was a man so dedicated to his science that the only way he felt was safe to test his experiments was on himself, had let his lab fall to severe disarray.

Kirk, who had hearing that rivaled Clark’s (if not surpassing the Kryptonian’s ability entirely), somehow hadn’t heard Bruce buzzing into his office.

Kirk, his good friend who had never said no to his company before, and the beast within Kirk who called himself Man Bat and was extremely territorial of people entering his space — neither had reacted to Bruce yelling for the scientist as he traversed the halls.

When Bruce swung the door to Kirk’s lab open with all the bravado of a man used to walking into any space and being the center of attention, his suspicions that had been rapidly growing during the walk were confirmed.

Kirk Langstrom couldn't hear him.

He flicked the lights a few times.

The scientist startled violently. The mutant smacked one of the vials off his desk as he whirled around to face the door with one hand against his chest and the other tensed like he was going to swipe at whatever got closest. When Kirk's wide eyes settled on Bruce, a peculiar expression crossed his face. The doctor shook his head, as if manually forcing something from his mind, and relaxed.

"Hey, Bruce!" Kirk practically yelled. If it wasn't already clear that Bruce's friend had something wrong with his hearing, having mild-mannered Kirk almost yelling at him was a dead give away.

"Kirk!" Bruce grinned with a wave and spoke loudly, "You didn't hear the intercom?"

Kirk sighed and ran a hand over his face, "God, you sound like you're far away and underwater… I didn't hear you come in," Kirk admitted with a tired frustration, "I apologize."

"What's going on, Kirk?" Bruce asked. He couldn't confront him without suspicion, but it wasn't the first time Bruce Wayne would be confided in regarding Man Bat.

Kirk stared at him for a moment before frustrated fiddling with his ear, "I'm sorry, could you repeat that?"

"What's going on, Kirk?" He repeated.

"What's going on?" Kirk questioned back as he unwrapped a hearing aid from behind his ear and set it on his desk with an angry groan, "My old hearing aid isn't helping… A while ago, Man Bat picked a fight with someone he thought was Robin. It wasn't, and now we can't hear again."

Bruce frowned in concern. He pointed to Kirk's hearing aid and shook his head, "And your old hearing aid isn't strong enough? I thought it was the highest strength you could get."

"My hearing aid? No, I can't get it in any higher of a decibel, Bruce," Kirk frowned as he ruffled his hair, "I've been to my audiologist. If I want more than what I can hear now, my next step is hoping I'm a candidate for Cochlear. It's kind've funny, actually."

Bruce hummed and gestured for him to continue as he moved to clean the glass on the floor next to Kirk's desk.

"I put so much time into finding a cure for deafness," Kirk laughed mirthlessly. "I made the serum, took it to cure my own deafness, and created a monster, but hey, we worked on that, and I cured the hearing loss too. My hearing was better than perfect! And then Man Bat decided he wanted to pick a fight," Kirk said with a disapproving shake of his head.

He pulled a small trash can from under his desk and offered it to Bruce as he grabbed some paper towel to wipe up his latest serum from the tiles.

"The last thing I could hear was this awful scream from this kid. When I came around, I was covered in mud, and there was this scraggly kid crying over me. My head hurt so damn bad, and I couldn't hear a thing," Kirk explained as he shooed Bruce's hands away from the liquid. The mutant wiped it up quickly, and threw it in the trash with a heavy acceptance, "It didn't sink in until I woke up to nurses poking me that I couldn't hear anything. Even with the serum's extraordinary healing, I can't really make things out. Just louder things, and even then."

"I… I'm sorry Kirk," Bruce offered sympathetically.

His friend and Rogue gave him a half-hearted grin after staring at his lips, "Hey, look at the bright sides. I already know what it's like to be deaf, and if we lose it completely? Well, in this case, and this *specific case only,* I guess we did bring this on ourselves. He should've left that kid alone," Kirk frowned. Bruce watched the other man stare at the ground for a moment, as if lost in thought.

The detective wasn't sure if it was Man Bat that captured the attention of Kirk or if it was snippets of memories from that night. Bruce carefully squeezed Kirk's shoulder as the blond pushed whatever he was thinking about to the back of his mind.

"Batman's not going to need to worry about Man Bat. I doubt he's going to do much more than skulk around the laboratory whenever he does come out," Kirk hummed. He pushed himself back to his feet, and extended a hand to Bruce, "I really wish Man Bat had left that kid alone when it was clear he wasn't Robin. I don't think a new or better serum will fix the specific damage to our ears."

When Bruce finally left, he pretended the chill down his spine was the Gotham air rather than his own fears of damaging things irreparably with his own kids.

Danny found a good spot in a less-trafficked alley next to a long-abandoned nail salon and some sort of furniture store he was almost certain was a money laundering scheme. He kicked some trash out of the way, hid in the darkest shadow of the alley, and let himself sink to the ground.

As the cold bricks scraped against his sweater and the exhaustion gnawed at his bones, Danny found himself staring up into the cloudy smog. His head pounded like the bass from Ember's concert. The bricks were a balm to the pressure behind his eyes.

With a long, drawn out sigh, the halfa closed his eyes and let his head fall against his knees.

It was as good a place as any to pass out…

*“Danny… What are we going to do?” Sam asked nervously as she ran alongside them, the three of them trying to stay together as long as they could.*

*“Try not to die the rest of the way, I guess,” Danny huffed as he looked over his shoulder, “I'll meet you both at our spot in the forest.”*

*“Bro, you better be there,” Tucker threatened. They both knew it was a plea.*

*Danny nodded and split off, trying to race his parents home.*

…Danny woke to a spike of cold within his chest, and threw his head up to see a familiar Crime Lord leaping down from the roof.

“Damn, kid, you’re good,” Red Hood teased.

“Nah, just sleeping with one eye open,” Danny shrugged.

“Very true, and out here it's best practice,” Hood let out his own snort as he moved from his crouch and sat down next to Danny against the wall, “A little birdy told you you have this insane plot to tutor my runts into getting into Gotham Academy?”

“I don’t suppose this bird has scruffy red hair?”

“A Crime Lord never reveals his secrets,” Hood sassed as he ruffled Danny’s hair.

Danny grinned as he pushed gently at Hood’s shoulder. No need to accidentally push the man way accidentally, “Dude, that’s for magicians.”

“And Crime Lords, clearly. If magicians have informants, then I missed my calling,” He teased.

“First you have to know a magic trick that works. Appearing out of thin air is clearly out of the question,” Danny said. He stretched and popped his back, “So, what don’t you like about my little scheme?”

Hood said nothing for a moment as he looked back at him, “Oh, nothing really. Those kids deserve a better chance, but, uh, Gotham Academy?”

“Nah, I get it. It’s the rich kid school, but I think it can be done. Also Lavender’s having a hard time with Devin’s school career, so if nothing else, it’ll push him to do better,” Danny chuckled. He relaxed against the wall with a lazy grin.

“Honestly, Snacks?” Hood said lightly, “I think it can be done too.”

“Really?”

“Fuck yeah! School’s important, and everyone fuckin’ knows that Alley schools are fucking garbage,” Hood exclaimed, “If you can get ‘em in, I’ll make sure they can stay.”

Danny raised an eyebrow and scratched the back of his neck, “Uh… You sure? Because I was going to make them fight for the scholarships.”

“Mhmm, don’t say jack shit ‘bout it, but whoever doesn’t land one, I’ll arrange somethin’ else. We’ll talk later about it,” Hood said with a clap against his shoulder, as if he’d already decided it was a team effort.

Danny figured that was his right as a Crime Lord. He wasn’t an expert on Crime Politics, but he did know Hood cared about his people.

Hood continued, “Ike may have told me about the scheme—”

“I thought a Crime Lord never revealed his informants?” Danny teased.

“I’ll kick your ass, you little shit,” Jason snorted, “But she didn’t tell me much more after that, just that she and the others were looking for you.”

“Ah, I see,” Danny hummed. Danny pushed himself up from the wall, and gave a tired, cheeky salute, “Thanks, Hood.  I’ll see if I can’t find them then.”

Red Hood returned the salute, and even without looking, Danny knew that the Crime Lord stayed in that spot until Danny was long out of sight. He was a pretty decent guy, honestly.

Danny snorted. He pulled out his phone to check the time.

Three hours.

Not bad.

He’d get more sleep after checking in with the Alley Kids.

“Ah, Master Bruce, home in time for your nightly excursion, I see,” Alfred said as his oldest charge entered the kitchen.

“I may be home, but I’m not patrolling tonight,” Bruce said with a small smile.

Alfred raised an eyebrow as he carried the pot to the sink to strain, “Goodness, that’s a first. Bruce Wayne willingly taking a night off.”

“Ha! Maybe…”

Alfred waited a moment before raising his eyebrow, “Pardon me for saying so, but you seem to have something on your mind, sir.”

Bruce gave him a tired smile and collected his perfectly warmed dinner from the counter as he thought about what to say.

“I’m going to be looking into therapists tonight to find one that I can comfortably go to,” Bruce hummed, “I may be taking a night off, but I’m not about to not look into people who I need to trust with sensitive information. I’m still paranoid.”

“I see, Master Bruce,” Alfred set the pot down in the sink before crossing the room. He laid a steady hand on Bruce’s shoulder and squeezed, “While I could make a jest at your self-awareness, I’d rather you hear me when I say that I’m proud of you for seeking a therapist under your own power,” Alfred assured. The older man paused for a moment as he pulled away, “I think it would do you a great good.”

Bruce took a deep breath and released a sigh of relief.

“Thanks, Alfred.”

For the first time in a long time, Bruce felt good about putting time aside for himself. Batman couldn’t fix this problem.

For his kids, Bruce would figure out how to fix himself.

Chapter End Notes

I don't usually add in end notes explaining things, but I feel I should mention that Kirk Langstrom was/is a deaf character canonically (hence trying to cure deafness and making himself Man Bat accidentally). In some canons, I think it might be his daughter or wife that's actually deaf?? But even then, I imagine Kirk would've still been hard of hearing, as other than ethics) why else would someone take an experimental cure for deafness, and how would they know if it worked without being hoh/deaf to begin with.

# barrel fires don’t mean barely surviving, but, maybe just this once, they do, but where are the fires if that’s the case?

Chapter Notes

Hello lovelies, I just wanna thank everyone who reached out in the comments, it meant a lot. Sorry to report that 2024 really hasn't gotten better than my 2023. Both of my dogs have died from the winter to the spring. There's a mystery problem with my truck that no one can figure out because it legit shouldn't be possible. Could kill me, idk anymore. Work went to hell in a handbasket, and I had to go on unpaid medical leave because of it and a bunch of crap in general went down at work (total fucking shit show). During my medical leave, my grandfather died, and oh my god, the family drama that I’ve dealt with from that has been astronomical and very cold-war-esque. I now have 3 jars worth of dead grandparents in my truck and the certificate to wield them anywhere. Tbh, I’m just along for the ride at this point, and I’m also forcing a friend to keep an eye on his fucking blood that keeps trying to kill him. You know who you are, mother fucker. I’ve got my eye on you and your blood.

Can't even say this is the author curse. My life seems to just be like this lmao but I hope the a/n was worth the wait?

Enjoy the chapter!

It took a couple questions, but Danny eventually tracked Ike down to a homeless camp tucked away in one of the still-ruined brick buildings down a lane. Even in the hushed firelight from the old oil drums and makeshift fireplaces, Ike was easy to pick out from a crowd with her untamable red hair. As he took in the encampment, the subtle showing of respect towards Ike became more and more obvious as he approached.

Older members of the encampment (which, Danny noted, was fucking everyone besides Ike) said nothing to him, even the ones who knew him. Subtle glancing at Ike told him all he needed to know. They were waiting for the newcomer to be acknowledged.

Not that he needed her approval to annoy her.

Danny cracked a smile and plopped down next to her, “So,” Danny started even as Ike burst into a stream of curses he couldn't understand. That kind of cursing was universal, “I heard

you were looking for me?”

“Yeah, to fuckin shoot ya ass, god damn. Gonna give a girl a heart attack, mother fucker!” Ike snarled through gritted teeth as she landed a punch to his shoulder. Danny ignored how the people nearest to the fire did their best to ignore the fight, and the closest ones to Ike wouldn’t look at her after the punch.

He shrugged, “What did you think was gonna happen? I always pop into sight. Was today gonna be different?”

Instead of sassing him back, Ike pushed her unruly red curls out of her face with a deeply inset scowl. If Danny didn’t annoy the kids on a consistent basis, maybe he’d assume she was actually angry with him.

*The bruising darkness of a locker held nothing against him now.*

He respectfully let his smile fall as a few in the crowd shifted uneasily, as if getting ready to leave to grant Ike privacy while others seemed to brace themselves to throw Danny out.

Ike held in a sigh and turned to meet Danny’s eyes.

“Look, Tommy,” She started. Danny couldn’t resist cutting her off.

“First name? Wow, I must’ve fucked up,” Danny joked lightly.

“No. Devin did, and don't defend his dumbass either,” Ike said. She turned to face him with a very stern, serious expression without the fiery temper that the halfa was used to seeing. “He told me what happened in the apartment.”

“So you’re down to do this tutoring scheme?”

“Are ya still willing to do it after Devin threw the plate at your head?” Ike asked seriously.

It beat the missiles Skulker threw, or being ran over by Johnny 13, but Danny kept that to himself. Danny snorted and laid a gentle hand on Ike’s shoulder, “I’d take a plate to the face any day of the week.” He ignored the flood of irrational anger that the proclamation brought.

“You really ain’t bothered?” Ike prodded nonchalantly, “Because I can have my Second *apologize* properly. You’re fuckin’ Snacks, and if he ruined anythin’ because they can’t learn t’ control their temper, then Imma put them through their paces.”

The halfa caught himself before he could reflectively crack a joke to cover for whatever anger slipped through the cracks for the gang leader to see. It was a rare occasion when Ike flexed her power over her upper echelon. Usually, Danny heard about it second hand. He assured, “I don’t need or want a proper apology. Dev didn’t hurt me, and I’m not upset.”

A tense moment passed before she grabbed his wrist and tugged him down to eye level. Ike grit her teeth, “Tommy, if I find out you’re covering for him, Devin will be a *example* of not to cross me, am I bein’ perfectly fuckin’ clear?”

Danny didn’t risk looking away, but he could hear the scattering of movement through the gathered community, likely bracing themselves for a beatdown. Or a murder. The halfa was pretty certain Ike was never unarmed.

He couldn’t help the cheeky grin that spread across his face even as he pushed down a bubble of anger. He didn’t mind Ike pulling him around, “I promise, ma’am, I’m not covering for him, and even if I was hurt by the plate, it was nothing I wasn’t warned about from Lav. Besides, I’ve already made study plans.”

Next to him, Ike relaxed. The others followed in her lead seamlessly.

That reminded him, Red Hood would probably print those out for him if he asked nicely. Danny stretched and sat back, “Yeah, was a bitch to compile,” No, it wasn’t. Tucker and Sam wrote it up, but a little guilt trip wouldn’t hurt, “So maybe a little bird would like to share who all wants to participate?”

When Ike cracked a smile, Danny felt like he'd won.

By the time the daylight was well and truly gone, Danny had a decent chunk of names on a list in his phone, a promise from Ike that she would arrange study sessions in the sewer base, and very interesting gossip.

Granted, he always got gossip when he ran into the kids, but it wasn't usually gang war gossip.

"The fire that almost killed Jesse? A fucking ruse, and it pisses me off endlessly," Ike grumbled quietly as she tied her choppy curls at the base of her neck

"Ruse, huh?" Danny asked lightly as he kicked a rock away, "So who escaped from Arkham? That's usually how it goes, right?"

"Yeah, kinda, but we don't know" Ike sighed, "Listen, we've been running overtime after the fire already, and we've picked up the pace since that rockstar came to town. With the rumours of a new guy on the scene, I don't know if I actually believe that the Alley fire was started by Scarecrow."

The halfa felt his eye twitch as he processed her statement, "Run that by me again?"

"Scarecrow. He's a little bitch most of the time," Ike dismissed, "Usually, he'll come around, gas everyone, cause chaos, and eat shit when someone kicks his ass. He's a shit doctor, and a

shittier little bitch boy on a power trip by drugging his victims with fear gas."

Sure, Scarecrow was a little bitch. Absolutely. For sure.

"No no, before that."

"Ah, the new guy? Yeah, so some of Croc's gang started talking about a Grundy Junior being in town," Ike huffed and leaned back onto the heels of her hands, "We don't know what kinda monster they are, or what their deal is, so we can't tell if Scarecrow really did cause a diversion for something or if it was Junior."

Danny wanted to vanish into a hole and bite Waylon again.

"A dead guy using fire?" Danny asked sarcastically as he thought about Dan and Vlad.

*And the crown.*

"More likely than you'd think in Gotham," Ike dismissed, "I like it more than the idea that Scarecrow burned down the Alley as a cover."

*The crown that was supposedly his.*

"There aren't many who actively embrace the fact that Scarecrow's a little bitch. There is one person who tends to use him a lot, actually, and I really don't want it to be that circus circle-jerk."

Danny shook his head with a deep breath. He laughed, "Who the fuck are you talking about? The Joker?"

*"Ya rang, kiddos?"*

Crazed laughter bounced through the space as the colour left Ike's face as she pulled a gun on the voice behind them. Clouds of purple scattered through the camp even as he turned to see scuffed up dress shoes. As he scanned his eyes up to look at the plainest clown face he had ever seen, he missed the moment his mouth ran ahead of his brain.

"How many tailors did you go through to get that ugly knock-off zoot suit?" Danny heard himself ask stupidly.

"If you'd like to polish it up, I think a little *red* would be fantastic…" The clown grinned almost good-naturedly. Danny didn't believe it for a second.

Ike yanked his arm as deranged laughter began filtering through the crowd, "Dumpster, we need to *go!"* She hissed quietly, firing at one of the goons beside the Clown Prince of Crime as she tried to pull him along.

A small part of Danny wondered if he was a true Gothamite now that he'd actually met the man.

"Aw! But I finally found *a new tailor who understands my style!"* Joker cackled and swung his foot expertly towards Danny's head.

Danny pushed Ike far away from him as a bigger part of him remembered that it definitely wasn't a good thing.

He wondered if the laughing faded or if that was him passing out.

The muffled sounds of wherever he was was almost rhythmic enough to be soothing. It wasn't really comfortable.

"-Mmy! Tommy, wake up!"

However, it wasn't the most uncomfortable he'd ever been by a longshot either. He'd take the rope that tied him up over any of his dad's ghost grabbing devices any day.

"Wake up please!" Ike begged softly as she kicked him in the back of the thigh. It was sore enough that he figured she'd been beating at his leg for a while.

His head pounded as he pried his eyes open through a crust he could bet was blood, "I'm up, twerp, stop curb stomping…"

"How else am I going to practice for when we get out of here and I beat yer dumbass black and fuckin' blue?!" Ike hissed, "If you were anyone from my crew, we woulda been out of there before the gas got us."

Danny murmured and wiggled around on what was clearly cold concrete, "In my defense, I was kicked in the head, not gassed…" He rolled over to face Ike's fear filled expression, "You okay? Hurt at all?"

The stony acceptance on Ike's face wasn't one he liked, "Not yet," She whispered back, "But the others, some of them, yeah. Some of them are already dead."

Panic filled his chest as he tried to look over Ike to see the bodies strewn behind her, hopefully alive.

*He was right there. He should've done more. He shouldn't have let his guard down.*

*He was a failure like always.*

"Snacks, don't. Just, don't look. Don't listen. We can't help them," Ike begged. The methodical and rhythmic sounds that Danny found soothing before now sent chills down his spine. He could make out smiles ripped painfully wide and pressed into skin so pale it was white. Some of those he'd known since coming to the city stared into oblivion, no longer moving. Some that had gone missing months ago.

Others choked on sounds of half-laughter, half- *something* that ripped uncontrollably from their chests. Newer victims soon to die.

Some of the screaming laughs were still loud. Fuller laughter that was, if the corpses were any indication, soon to dissipate, though not as soon as those who were quiet.

Others who hadn't been affected yet looked petrified as they did their best to move away. Danny couldn't blame them.

"Fuck, the missing homeless camps," Danny breathed, "We gotta get out of here, Ike."

"Nowhere's safe. I think they hit up all of us," The red head squirmed in her binds, slowly wiggling them down, "Nothing like dying as a batch-tester for his fucking Joker Toxin instead of a fucking all-out attack."

"Well, Miss Mafioso, let's get your boss down here before the rest of us are laughing up daisies," Danny grumbled, "I can't even get into regular college. I'm not starting with clown school."

The halfa watched for the moment Ike closed her eyes, searching for a respite they all knew they wouldn't get in a corpse filled warehouse. Not if they stayed.

"Do you have your phone?" Danny asked as he let the ropes phase through him.

"No, goon kicked it out of my hand back at the camp," She said softly.

"Then you'll have to borrow mine if you make sure you mind your fucking business," Danny hissed as he pushed himself up. He kicked the rope away before hurriedly untying Ike's exhausted form. Shocked eyes stared up at him before she scrambled to sit up.

Ike looked up in confusion even as she looked over his shoulder, "How the fuck did you do that so quickly?"

"Don't worry about it. We have more important shit right now," Danny said as he pulled an arm into his sweater. He dug around in his backpack for a moment before pushing his arm back into his sleeve. The halfa dropped his phone and a well-used pocket knife into Ike's lap, "Don't worry about any code, just swipe for the emergency calling. I want these back when we make it out of here."

"Tommy, wait—"

Danny cut her off, "We don't have time to talk, we need to—"

"—Stay for the party?" A familiar, dark voice called out from across the warehouse. Even through the shadows, Danny could see the Joker smoothly slip his coat on with a well-versed flick of his arm. The bright red grin stood out from the rest of him even as he mockingly ran a comb through his hair, "I completely agree, though you two in particular are a little too fashionably early. You aren't even dressed for the occasion!"

Danny slowly moved back from Ike with a whisper, "Get out. Don't wait."

“Snacks!” Ike hissed. She cursed and moved to the closest person who was still themselves to work at the rope.

The Joker waved his arms in a mocking welcome gesture, “I know my invitation didn’t specify ‘fancy-dress’, but at least wait for your smile before causing trouble, Kiddo.”

“Maybe I missed the memo,” Danny called back, “Hope I didn’t disappoint the host of this shitty event.”

Joker let out a laugh as he strolled out to the light, “Don’t worry, if you’re a disappointment now, then I’ll just have to shape you up to meet the expectations of good-ole Uncle Jay like the good host that I am.”

# If you'd look to the sky, you might wonder why your life is worth more than mine. I would ask you why you think you were ever below me.

Chapter Notes

Sorry, my life is a disaster (we'll leave it at that because I can't discuss the crap that's been going on for a multitude of reasons, but you're better for it). It's not the author's curse, I swear my life is just like this -- I have several witnesses to this testimony. Gonna try not to really bring it up too much from now on because I get that most of the life updates are uhhhhh not great? We ball. Genuinely, thanks for reading, and thanks for the support. Be safe and be kind to one another, lovelies. Have a great day/night/timezone, I'm gonna go sleep off this fever :>

Happy Halloween 👻

lil extra author note: right after I posted this, I ended up with a second fever that very much almost killed me for realsies and that was terrifying. Turns out I am severely sick, and even making this edit, my body may still attack itself again like that.

It wasn't as though Danny wasn't used to the dead.

They were louder than the husks behind him, clouded in various states of decayed preservation. It was weird.

*Unnatural.*

He could relate.

He ignored that people weren't supposed to be able to relate.

*Molecule by molecule.*

It's what he deserved for trusting safety in numbers.

"I'm starting to think crazy uncles are normal," He murmured to himself. Danny reached into the back of his hood, pulling at the top of his backpack until the zipper parted enough to retrieve the familiar baton from where it was nestled in the center of his back.

"You're a few sticks short of a juggler's gambit, boy," Joker chuckled, "But I respect the *enthusiasm!"*

"Nobody expects Surprise Clown College," Danny gave him a detached smile as he adjusted his grip on Jazz's Anti-Creep Stick 2.0. Admittedly, it was an upgrade from his mom's bat with the Fenton logo stuck on it. A black baton was a lot subtler. *Thanks, Jazz,* "Sorry if my school supplies aren't up to par. Short notice, and all that."

The cursed clown let out a wail of angry laughter, "If anyone understands that sentiment, Kiddo, it's me. Do you know how hard it is to keep supply chains?" He asked incredulously even as he pulled out a gun from his waistband, "Can't pay to keep a good supply chain up and running! Market crashes, exploding warehouses, bat problems, insane taxes; the problems never end!"

"And you think becoming an uncle's gonna change that?" Danny asked as he slowly made his way over. He didn't know how much time that he had, but he was determined to make it count, "I dunno, man. Uncles are bat-shit crazy."

"It's a risk, I admit! You never know if you'll have a supplier blow up or land a troublesome kid like my gaggle of birdies," Joker agreed as retrieved a pistol from the back of his waistband, "Although, in my experience, you can solve both with a little bit of fun… and gratuitous violence."

Fuck.

*Pain in his stomach. Blue hair and a zest for survival. Phasing the bullets out one by one in a firelit alley.*

Danny spared a glance towards Ike's unmistakable red hair as it bobbed and weaved through those on the ground. A big part of Danny knew that months ago, those laying there would have been left to chance their fates.

*It had been worth it to see them thrive.*

Danny flicked his wrist. He ran forward to close the gap with a wide swing. It was bait, and they both knew it.

*It was always worth it.*

Danny watched the Joker's smile widen knowingly, as if he was both bored and excited at the prospect of a fight he knew the outcome of. Danny figured that he thought the fight would be over before it began.

A headshot.

The halfa wasn't going to give him that satisfaction.

The Joker let out a dark chuckle, "Ain't you a quick little scamp. Uncle Jay's got something for little shits like you."

*"Shoot once, think twice!" His father boomed as he took a potshot out the kitchen window.*

His dad had butchered sayings, but maybe he was right about that saying just once. If he moved close enough, the stupid clown would be forced to either take the shot, move, or eat shit.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Ike turn towards them in a flurry of curls, “Tommy, No!”

Danny changed the angle of his swing as Joker took his aim between Danny’s eyes, following mostly what the teen had expected. Danny prepared to both brace himself and let the bullet phase right through.

He held his breath as Joker pulled the trigger.

*Take the shot.*

*Move.*

*Eat shit.*

Something burst free from the chamber of the Joker's pistol. His cakey grin widened as he pistol-whipped the scrawny street kid. Danny wanted to say that his life flashed before his eyes.

*Secret fourth option.*

In reality, it was a god damn flag, a bright red one with ***BANG*** written across it. Danny couldn't remember a time where a wave of anger hadn't been so intense.

He was pretty sure if he didn't hate Joker before, he did at that moment, and he couldn't be bothered to rationalize whether he was being influenced by the stupid ring or not. The mostly-irrational rage that burned in his chest at the insult of being whacked with a stupid flag screamed at the top of its lungs.

"As a treat to my new dear nephew, I'll play on even ground so long as you live up to my expectations," Joker grinned, "Feeling a little giggly yet, Time Bomb? Because you're looking a little *green* around the gills."

"The gills, huh?" Danny scoffed as he wiped his bloodied lips across his sleeve, "Sure it's not my eyes?" He asked rhetorically as he cocked his head. He knew damn well he was pissed enough for them to be absolutely glowing green.

"Mmm, those too, you're starting to look like a spitting image," Joker cackled as he caressed the barrel of the "prop" gun, "I might even have to start calling you my son if you come out looking good enough."

The halfa couldn't stop the wicked grin even if he wanted to. He whipped the baton against the clown's ribs hard enough to hear a crack and moved smoothly to clash back against the damn flag without missing a beat, "See, maybe that'll be the funniest thing you've ever said to anyone."

“Oh really,” Joker wheezed through a laugh, “Got a reason why I’d waste my best joke on a Nobody?”

“Because most would say it's a bad omen to have me as a son,” Came the casual response with way more calm than he felt burning in his veins, “Because Nobody is exactly who I want to be.”

He could hear the scrambling behind him. Echoes of a fist fight came from those free enough to fight for what was left of their lives. He wished he had a chance to peek at Ike, but any indication he wasn’t paying attention was a chance at her death. He’d settle for the scuffle and shouts getting more and more distant as everyone presumably fought their way to the outer halls. It was die here or die trying. Danny hoped they gave it their all.

A purple shoe booted him squarely in the chest, sending him skidding across the disgusting warehouse floor.

“Don’t kid yourself, Time Bomb,” The apparent mad man hummed as he swung down across Danny’s torso again and again, “Nobody’s die like they’re supposed to, tied up and waiting for salvation that either *comes in time* or *fails you* like all your other buddies cluttering my corner. Nobody’s are useless until you give them a purpose. Maybe they should be grateful they got to go out on a *positive note.* ”

Danny grit his teeth and gripped his ankle. He rolled backwards, yanking Joker over himself and slammed him into the ground. The halfa let go in favour of gripping that stupid vest, and pulled himself to a kneel with Joker’s gut as his balance point.

He panted through bloodied teeth and looked down at the Joker, who’s cruel grin tightened across his face with a sick self-satisfaction. It twisted something in Danny’s own chest. He let the ground frost beneath him. He paid no mind when the ice grew jagged and dug into Joker’s sides, staining the crystals with frosted red.

*Stars on the ceiling. The burn of a cold locker. The empty, graffitied bathroom he patched himself up in.*

“Guess going out on a positive note isn’t my thing,” Danny swung the Creep Stick down hard on his clavicle.

“Ooooo aren’t you a fun one,” Joker smiled languidly, “You’re going to some extremes for someone who should’ve just accepted his fate and died, but that’s fine by me, Kiddo. You’ll fit right in. ”

“I did accept my fate, but sometimes it just doesn’t stick,” Danny ignored the tearing sound of wet and frozen cloth, vindictively ripping him free from his spot frozen to the floor without a care. He held the stupid flag at bay in the next swing, and hauled the fucker up by the shirt to keep over his head. His knuckles creaked as he squeezed the handle of the baton, preparing to block the next attempted swing from the cake-faced clown.

The Joker smiled even with sharp ice still dug into his sides, torn between his torso and the ground like horrific garnets, “Careful, boy, the baby’s watching,” The clown hissed between his grin, the heavy threat of exposure beholden to the air as it rushed from his lungs.

Danny blinked, icy fear rushing through his veins as he looked across the hall in time to stare into Ike’s.

Green into glowing green.

Crouched at the last group who were still alive behind the unruly mob of angry kidnappees beating back against the enforcers with everything they had left, Ike held his gaze with the beginnings of an unhinged smile starting to contort her face. Her stray curls escaped the hold of her ponytail as she stilled in the middle of sawing someone free.

Danny was sure she was scared. He knew the face of a kid terrified and in over their head — he wore it often enough. She was doing a good job at not showing it, but it was clear Joker saw through it.

The ice that was trapped deep in the Joker’s flesh melted in a spurt of blood and splattered on the cement around them in a slow, steady mockery of rainfall as Danny held the bastard aloft over his head.

“Tommy…” Ike trailed off as she watched on, searching for something Danny couldn’t identify before her expression paled. She opened her mouth to say something.

Danny couldn’t make it out over the ringing in his ears. The painful sting of that fucking ***BANG*** gun radiated across his head, and Danny figured out quickly enough what Ike was trying to warn him about.

Horrible cackling rang out above as Joker gripped the tip of the flag and pushed it against Danny’s neck, sealing them both in a stalemate.

*Expose himself more? Or choke while holding him still. It was like dealing with Vlad’s stupid rivalry all over again.*

“Tik tok, Time Bomb,” He whispered through his laughter, “Better make it good.”

He let the Anti-Creep Stick clatter against the cold cement as he dug against his own neck for any hint of purchase. With both hands occupied, Danny firmly planted his foot into Joker’s stomach and let go. He was more than happy to listen to the purple-clad asshole smack against the floor.

He grabbed Jazz’s gift from the bloody splatters, “Ike, get out of here!” Danny yelled. He didn’t bother looking over to watch her go. Her footsteps were deafening, the solo in a chorus of growing laughter from outside the walls as the sounds from the others still tied began to fade.

The urge to laugh bubbled in his own chest. The feeling was disgusting, a slimy, hazy grasp within his chest that made him light headed in the worst way.

“It’s about time I get a super for a son,” Joker spoke softly to himself as Danny pushed himself up.

“I’d say it's way more medical than super,” Danny mumbled to himself in turn. The halfa watched as the bastard rose back to his feet and licked the blood from the flag’s pole. “And I am *super* not your son.”

“Give it a few more minutes and you’ll be my spitting image. I think I might even skip the electroshock therapy if you’re Papa Jay’s good little boy.”

“Oh no, electricity! I’m so scared you’ll kill me with that!” Danny yelled sarcastically, the smile etching itself across his face grew in a mockery of peace.

He swung forwards, not willing to give the clown a second to breathe. Why bother?

They were both out for blood.

“Save me the drama, Joker,” Danny scoffed and swung hard, happily throwing himself back against the madman, “And either kill me like the other or fuck off, you blood-licking psycho.”

“Psycho? How original,” The Cheshire grin stretched wider as he locked the baton with his pistol, pulled the teen closer, and licked Danny’s bloodied face, “I’ll let you in on a trade secret, Tommy-Boy: You’re only as crazy as they want you to be.”

*Mom, his loving mom, pulling her knife from its strap on her hip. The spark in her eyes was for him, not her research and not other ghosts, just him. He was scared of her for the first time in a way that felt like the end of the world.*

“I’m one hundred and ten percent certifiably *sane.* I am the way I am for no other reason than I *want* to be,” The clown grinned sadistically and ruffled his messy hair with a condescending coo, “People will always want a monster to be more than just a man.”

“If I’m a man, then I’m a muppet of a man,” Danny tossed back, trying to ignore the attempts to provoke him.

*People always wanted him to be a monster. It was easier than seeing him as a kid.*

No matter how true or painful they were.

*Ignore it, please. Ignore it.*

“They’ll call you crazy, Kiddo, and crazy’s more power than they will *ever* have,” Joker’s grin stretched wider as he pushed the flag closer. The lanky man leaned down to whisper between their clashing weapons, “All they’ll do is deny what’s in front of them until their life breaks around them, completely out of their control, while you get to keep your own.”

“Crazy? I was crazy once,” Danny hummed as he twisted the arm of the baton, “The locked me in a room, a rubber room with rats, and the rats? The rats make you crazy.”

“Insanity’s a state of mind you’ll fall into eventually. You’ll embrace it, you’ll learn,” He whispered, “Insanity is the most sane that you’ll ever be, completely free from their expectations. Make the label they want to give you matter if you want, but why change a single thing when no one bothers to learn about you in any meaningful way.”

“Mm, I don’t think sticking people with crazy juice counts as helping them see the real you, but I don’t mind a nice acid spray,” Danny offered back as he reached into his bag, fished out his dad’s failed disinfectant spray, andmanaged to spray a bit in his latest crazy uncles face before he was kicked away.

“You think that’s gonna hurt? I’m the Clown Prince of Gotham, baby! A little acid? You little —” Joker paused as a hoarse scream ripped through the air.

“Okay, maybe it’s not acid, but I’m hoping it’s enough to get your little chuckle concoction to leave me alone,” Danny panted and sprayed the ground around him quickly before quickly spraying a huge amount in his own mouth like cold medicine, “Sorry, I’m used to fighting the Clown Prince of Goths, *you baby* , and you’re definitely no Freakshow.”

The burning ripped through his lungs. He’d definitely be calling this a draw.

His vision warped and throbbed, and he stumbled away from the messy, angry pile of clown on the ground.

*"Please…" Hands wrapped around his neck. Glowing stars. His dad.*

"Very stupid," Danny whispered to himself, "God, I feel like it's eating me alive…" It was. Curse his dad's nightmarish inventions, but he wasn't dying to some second rate clown.

*He wanted his dad, and it was far too late for that now.*

Danny shoved Jazz's baton and the disinfectant back in his bag before weakly fading through through the nearest wall before he lost himself in his anger and Joker's stupid wonder drug.

He reimbursed in the shadow of a warehouse in one of the grungier parts of Gotham, but he couldn't place it over the pain tearing his limbs apart from within. With a heavy shove, Danny pushed himself away from the cold brick wall into the decrepit street.

The vaguely familiar sound of something wheezing through the air flew above his head. Through blurry vision, Danny could make out the bright yellows of Gotham's daylight hero, but didn't care to stay.

*He had to get out of here.*

Ike wasted no time in dialing Hood's direct line as she fled from Tommy's losing battle. She weaved effortlessly between those fighting for their lives and the enforcers fighting to not be on their boss' shit list.

"Hood, it's Ike. Joker's active in Burnley, warehouse on Hurden. We've been dosed. Lots of us are dead already," Ike reported briskly as she slit the throat of a lackey stupid enough to try grabbing her from behind.

Would she try it on the Joker? Before tonight, absolutely.

Now, she couldn't be sure. He was already on a *"Do not engage"* order, but…

She couldn't get Tommy's expression out of her mind. The singular terror he had when he looked at her with Joker whispering hellish nothings into his ear, and the shower of crystalized blood, chilled her to the bone.

# I’m sorry you were alone with only phantom pressure to keep your feet in the ground. I was busy being the sky on a regular Tuesday.

Chapter Notes

> Happy 2025, lovelies: ✊💅by god, it’s already been such a shit year, but im gonna try to keep looking at the upsides :> love yall, and if ya struggling, then we are all going to hell in a handbasket together. I am very tired and I'm trying to write but also its hard when I could be recovering spoons, mmmm delicious spoons
>
> We persevere in spite, i guess.

Glowing green eyes and a half-jokerized smile etched unknowingly onto a haunted, pale face stared up at Duke for a moment as the guy stumbled away. He knew that face. He knew those eyes.

*“Woah, your hands are cold. I’m Duke, nice to meet you.”*

*The phantom lights of the old train flickered in the sides of his vision, both there and never there. The homeless teen with eyes made weird by aggressive fluorescents. Looking now, maybe it wasn’t the fluorescents that made his eyes reflect the way they had back then.*

*“Tommy, and same.”*

Duke knew that, despite seeing Tommy at the scene, the hero wouldn’t be stopping for him. He had no time. Jason would be rushing over because the Joker operating in Hood’s neighborhood was always taken personally. He could already catch images of his motorcycle flickering in and out of his sight in front of the warehouse.

He could see he was running out of time. He had to let Tommy go.

*Black and white and a mischievous grin embedded in snow. The being in his dreams, and his new unmeltable friend.*

For a moment, the ghostly image of the boy in his dreams lapsed where Tommy was. For a moment, the single moment before Dumpster disappeared into the shadowed alleyways, both he and the vision of the boy overlapped, contrasting vividly as they looked through him like he wasn't there.

He *knew* the eyes had been different back on the train.

Guess Tim was wrong about Tommy's blood.

Ike only stopped moving when she had cleared the neighborhood, leaving those in and around the warehouse to Hood and the Bats like her boss asked. Who was she to, in this moment, get in her boss' way. Not when the fucking Joker was involved.

His bike ripped around the corner and skidded to a stop just a ways in front of her. She spared a split second to hang up and shove Snacks' phone into her pocket as she sprinted for him.

"Hood!" Ike screamed in spite of the close distance, "Snacks. The Joker. They fought, and everyone who was missing. They're just fucking gone! I don't know who's left. We tried to get them out, but…"

Hood didn't interrupt her. He took in as much as possible even as he pulled a syringe free from his belt and slammed it into her thigh with a click.

"Stay close to base, pipsqueak. I doubt the old serum really works anymore. It'll be a temporary fix, if anything."

Ike didn't grimace. She waited until he pulled away from her before moving, "Orders?"

"Orders? Nah, you're benched for now," Hood said as he swung his bike towards the damn warehouse with a rev, "Tell Devin to step up and do the rounds in your place, and tell the fuckers at base to get a move on."

"Hood, wait! Before you go: Tommy. Something's not right," Ike pressed as she grasped his arm, "Shit's off. He got fucked up bad."

Jason gave a nod. Ike let go.

The streets were hazy. Dark. Wet.

They weren't great things to take note of, but it was all Danny could process as he moved on autopilot. He crashed through the alleys and lanes with air barely wheezing into damaged lungs, only to hit the ground and cough blood into a murky puddle before scrapping his hands against the bricks to continue his brutal pace. His body couldn't keep up, and his father's acid was quickly sweeping its way through his body.

His hands didn't want to work. He couldn't feel them past their shaking despite how he forced them to grip and pull at his environment.

*He was cold, but he'd been cold long before he'd been able to freeze himself from the inside out.*

Danny could barely see past the spots in his vision long enough to dodge the big black race car-looking gothic limousine as it barreled towards him. He couldn't think long enough to remember what a deer in headlights was supposed to do.

He was burning from the inside out, and no amount of his ice was helping. *Why wasn't it helping?* It was burning him alive in a pyre of his own existence.

He smacked against a light post and tried to catch his breath, any breath. Nothing really came. Danny felt his face numbly as he clung to the pole for dear life. A glance to his hand told Danny why it was hard to catch any air.

His nose was bleeding. He never got nose bleeds.

He squeezed his eyes shut to clear the spots as he flung himself forwards, *ever forwards,* and swallowed back the blood in his throat. With the last bits of vanishing consciousness he had left, he dropped himself through a sewer grate, and let himself drop unceremoniously into the freezing water below.

For a moment, just one, he was cold.

Then, the burning consumed him alive.

Jason slammed his bike into a harsh slide as Duke stood in the center of the road, staring knowingly in his direction.

"You here to stop me?" He snarled as he swung himself off his motorcycle, "Because it won't end well, though I guess you'd know that, wouldn't you?"

The daylight hero didn't rise to the bait, responding in an even tone, "Yeah, it probably won't end well."

"I'll give you one chance to move, Bright Eyes. Consider it a freebie," Jay hummed as he turned from his bike, "You're the rational one. I think you know that I'm going to kill that bastard whether you agree or not."

"I know," Duke nodded as he stood tall in front of his estranged foster brother, "I still can't let you go."

Jason flexed his shoulders, releasing a harsh popping sound as he strode away from the bike and closer to Duke. He cocked his head the tiniest bit in acknowledgement, "You're just as stupid as the rest of them."

"Probably," Duke agreed, but he could see the dark images of conflict flicker and overlap around Jason. Too quickly to pick up on, too many to let himself step aside, "I know I can't stop you."

"So *move."*

"You know I can't do that," Duke didn't move, knowing any shifting would be taken as an invitation, "You and I both know going inside will make things worse."

"For you, maybe, but I need to see. Those are my people!" Jason yelled as he pulled his gun from his holster, "And I'm not going to hold back for you or your shitty moral high ground."

"I know, and I agree with you," Duke acknowledged, "When you're done getting everything out here, maybe we can both go and see what you need to see."

Jason snorted as he shot a live round at the damn day hero. It missed, or, more accurately, Duke clearly saw it coming and dodged it. The thought just pissed the scorned ex-bat off more.

The news of the Joker attack, as always, spread like wildfire. Blaring sirens and news broadcasts rang clearly even through the manhole covers. Normally, it wouldn't bother Grundy.

But something was missing. Something that had come to annoy him into keeping him around.

Danny, the weird Half-Dead King.

He hadn't seen him in a while. Solomon Grundy has seen him almost every week, and definitely heard when Danny wasn't going to come bother him on Tuesdays.

The thought brought a deeper scowl to his face.

The sirens made him angry. They echoed down the tunnels towards the ones Danny usually ventured down to bother him. Those tunnels were his. What was his was Danny's.

And Danny wasn't around. And Grundy couldn't find him.

"Solomon Grundy… Born on a Mond-y…"

Grundy's large fingers clicked the buttons on the tiny frosted radio as he spoke. The sound that chirped back told him Danny's radio was on, but there wasn't an answer. Danny always answered when it was on.

Grundy looked up through an access grate. With little effort, he pushed the metal aside and pulled himself up onto the street. He ignored the way things went quiet around him, like any noise could get his attention. The people on the streets left him alone. Grundy would leave them alone.

There was only one noise that bothered him. His fist tightened around the radio.

That Pest was always trouble.

Duke paid no mind to the chirping in his ears. They were words he couldn't decipher from the other Bats that grated harshly against the sensory input from his powers, and not something he could let himself focus on. He smacked his earpiece to silence the noise.

*Not right now.*

Not as Jason needed him to be there to withstand the onslaught. Jason deserved to be seen by someone, and if he couldn't express himself in a way the others could grasp or relate to, then Duke would see him. Duke would watch the phantom images across the sidewalk of a Jason who, once upon another place and time, might've spilled his true feelings to them.

*The mourning of people in his own circumstance — people of the street and true Gothamites, struck down before their time and cursed beyond understanding by a city that stopped caring decades ago.*

It was something Duke knew well.

So if someone had to listen, he would. If he didn't understand, then he knew someone else would, and would listen anyways. *If nothing else, he cared enough to hear him.*

He swiped the blood away from his nose as he did his best to keep up with Jason. People so rarely could. There was a good reason Red Hood's organization was so steadfast.

"Just fucking move aside already!" Jason yelled in his face. His hands gripped the front of his suit and hoisted Duke into the air without much trouble. In Duke's defense, the Crime Lord was used to throwing around lugs way bigger than his semi-scrawny ass. In another lifetime, Duke would've loved to learn from someone so adept.

"Are you ready for me to move, man?" Duke asked hoarsely through the pain of a broken nose.

"Excuse me?"

Duke waved to the empty street and the area of their skirmish, "You kinda made no attempt to go around me. Figured maybe it was best to just be here with you for a bit. I dunno, felt right."

He carefully brushed his nose with his fingers as he watched Jason process what he'd said. The man's scowl deepened.

"You're fucking tellin' me I could've just made a move by you, skipped this whole thing, and potentially saved more people?" He yelled.

"Well, yes and no," Duke winced, trying to align his nose and failing. The pain of setting his own nose was always something he couldn't deal with, "Nothing feels different since things died down. Whoever died before, no one's joined them since I got here? I haven't seen anything weird from the building."

Just from Jason. That was an inside-thought though. He'd keep it there.

It was silent on the street. Duke's own heartbeat seemed to whip itself through the street as they stood in a standstill. Before he could second guess his own words to Jason, the man was striding past him, and with the deftest of hands, cracked his nose back into place before Duke had a chance to see it coming.

If Danny could've re-did one thing, he probably wouldn't know where to start. Been there, done that, got the echo-acne and time medallions.

However, maybe he could've saved himself the trouble of patching himself up all those months ago, or avoiding making a life that let him continue to live as well as he could on the road. It was silly, and he knew the answers to questions of "what if". They never turned out well, they were never meant to be, and had long since doomed themselves when the timeline swapped the order of the words to the universe's true path. He'd seen it often enough with Clockwork.

What if Danny wouldn't have been so stupid? Maybe he wouldn't have huffed his dad's stupid spray.

What if Danny hadn't believed in the future that the damn reality gauntlet had promised? He might've avoided almost losing his intestines on the highway, believing that maybe Jazz could've been right until the last possible second.

If what happened wouldn't have happened, no one would be anywhere. It was hard enough to exist outside of wrongfully righting time.

*God, the water felt so good in his lungs.*

Duke was out of commission occupying Jason. Tim, in all honesty, couldn't find himself to worry. Jason was different. They were on tentative terms, and for whatever little it was worth, Tim had a glimmer of trust in the Crime Lord.

Besides, whatever peace that was forged between them would be long lost if he let the Joker get away scott free. Tim, out of the many scenarios he had already planned and watched come true, didn't plan on Joker escaping to be one of them. This, in a sense, was a great thing seeing as his specialty was stalking. Really, he should be in federal prison for the level of stalking Tim likes to do for fun, never mind for his night job.

When he tracked Joker to the edges of the Coventry, he could've celebrated, but the weird laughing that seemed to echo across the block he'd tracked the bastard down to was… off-putting. Incomprehensible. It wasn't a normal sound to come from the Joker, but it kind of was. Tim recognized that mocking tone. The second he swung down onto the closest rooftop, he could see why. He was flat on the pavement laughing through a bloodied mouth.

He didn't have to wonder long as to why the Joker was bleeding from some indistinguishable internal wound.

From the other end of the street, Tim could easily spot the form of Solomon Grundy fast approaching. He couldn't even remember the last time the zombie had been spotted above ground, let alone been involved in anything.

But he was here, pissed at the Joker, and clearly in the middle of *expressing* that anger.

*Encroached territory,* Tim's mind whispered, *Exactly what we need right now.*

Tim swung down to the pavement as Gotham's Undead Horror effortlessly kicked Joker Past where he stood, down to the other side of the street. Even as Tim turned to track the Joker's rolling body, for the first time, Grundy paid him no mind. He didn't even break his ever-lumbering stride as he pursued the Joker.

“Grundy, talk to me: What can we do to end this?”

It was a little talked about thing among the Bats, and an almost unconsidered thing among the more aggressive criminal underground and Rogue Gallery. On the rare occasion, Solomon Grundy could be reasoned with. On touch and go occasions, Grundy had shown himself to be considerate of others, even leaving people alone for the most part when he was respected enough to be left alone.

No one, other than the Joker, had antagonized him. There was a lot of hope in this scenario.

Tim stood in the middle of the road and watched Grundy grab the Joker by the ankle.

*“A King,”* Solomon intoned as he glared over his shoulder, meeting Tim’s own eyes behind the domino without effort.

Tim had nothing he could say that would satisfy the being. They both knew it.

With a heave of his arm, Grundy whipped the Joker far over the buildings despite Tim’s own rushed protests.

Then, he turned on Tim.

Works inspired by this one

BtN fanart by doodlesforfics (d_f_f)

[Restricted Work] by Arktisol

Shining in the Night by fortheloveofakatosh

[Restricted Work] by UnderscoreIsCool

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